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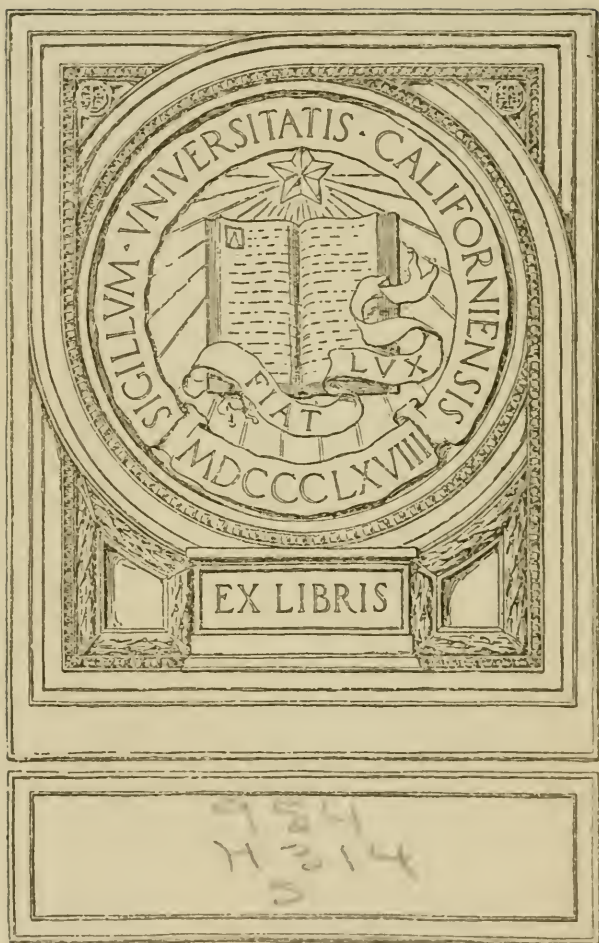


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SHAKESPEARE AND HIS LOVE

Frank Harris





BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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SHAKESPEARE AND HIS LOVE

*A PLAY IN FOUR ACTS
AND AN EPILOGUE*

BY

FRANK HARRIS

*(Author of "The Man Shakespeare,"
"The Women of Shakespeare," etc.).*



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INTRODUCTION

THE National Shakespeare Memorial Committee, it is announced, is about to produce a new play by Mr. Bernard Shaw entitled "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets." Fourteen years ago, provoked by the nonsense Mr. Shaw was then writing about Shakespeare in *The Saturday Review*, I wrote some articles on Shakespeare in the same paper, in which I showed in especial that Hamlet was a good portrait of Shakespeare, for the master had unconsciously pictured Hamlet over again as Macbeth and Jaques, Angelo, Orsino, Lear, Posthumus, Prospero and other heroes. With admirable quickness Mr. Bernard Shaw proceeded to annex as much of this theory of mine as he thought important ; in preface after preface to his plays, notably in the preface to

“Man and Superman,” he took my discovery and used it as if it were his. For instance, he wrote :—

“He (Shakespeare) must be judged by those characters into which he puts what he knows of himself, his Hamlets and Macbeths and Lears and Prosperos.”

And again :—

“All Shakespeare’s projections of the deepest humanity he knew have the same defect”—and so forth and so on.

In the preface to “Three Plays for Puritans” Mr. Shaw gave me a casual mention, just sufficient to afford him a fig-leaf, so to speak, of covering if the charge of plagiarism were brought against him: “His (Shakespeare’s) genuine critics,” he wrote, “from Ben Jonson to Mr. Frank Harris, have always kept as far on this side idolatry as I.”

Six or seven years ago I wrote a play called

“Shakespeare and his Love,” which was accepted by Mr. Beerbohm Tree. As Mr. Tree did not produce the play at the time agreed upon, I withdrew it. Some time afterwards, on the advice of a friend, I sent it to the Vedrenne-Barker management. They read it; but Mr. Barker, I was told, did not like the part of Shakespeare. I wrote, therefore, asking for the return of the play. Mr. Vedrenne, in reply, told me that he admired the play greatly, and still hoped to induce Mr. Barker to play it. He asked me, therefore, to leave it with him. A little while later I met Mr. Shaw in the street; he told me that he, too, had read my play which I had sent to the Court managers, and added, “you have represented Shakespeare as sadder than he was, I think; but you have shown his genius, which everyone else has omitted to do. . . .”

Last year I published a book entitled *The*

Man Shakespeare, which was in essence an amplification of my articles in *The Saturday Review*. A considerable portion of this book had been in print ten years. The work had a certain success in England and America. This year I have published in *The English Review* a series of articles on *The Women of Shakespeare*, which one of the first of living writers has declared marks an epoch in English criticism.

Now Mr. Shaw has written a play on the subject, which I have been working on for these fifteen years, and from what he has said thereon in *The Observer* it looks as if he had annexed my theory bodily so far as he can understand it, and the characters to boot. After talking about his play and Shakespeare's passion, and using words of mine again and again as if they were his own, he acknowledges his indebtedness to me in this high-minded and generous way :

“The only English writer who has really grasped this part of Shakespeare’s story is Frank Harris; but Frank sympathises with Shakespeare. It is like seeing Semele reduced to ashes and sympathising with Jupiter.”

This is equivalent to saying that all the other parts of Shakespeare’s story have been grasped by someone else, presumably by Mr. Shaw himself, and not by me. It is as if Mr. Cook had said, “the only American who really knows anything about Polar exploration is Captain Peary, though he uses his knowledge quite stupidly.” One can imagine that such testimony from such an authority would have been very grateful to Captain Peary.

This precious utterance of Mr. Shaw shows further that in his version of the story he is going to take the side of Mary Fitton against Shakespeare; he will therefore defend or at least explain her various marriages and her

illegitimate children by different fathers, none of whom happened to be married to her.

Mr. Shaw's sole contribution to our knowledge of Shakespeare is the coupling of him with Dickens, which is very much the same thing as if one tried to explain Titian by coupling him with Hogarth. This, in my opinion, is Mr. Shaw's only original observation on the subject, and its perfect originality I should be the last to deny.

I have not yet read or seen Mr. Shaw's play : I only wish here to draw attention to the fact that he has already annexed a good deal of my work and put it forth as his own, giving me only the most casual and grudging mention. From the larger acknowledgment in *The Observer*, I naturally infer that in this new play he has taken from me even more than he could hope to pass off as his own.

All this in the England of to-day is looked

upon as honourable and customary. If Mr. Shaw can annex my work it only shows that he is stronger than I am or abler, and this fact in itself would be generally held to absolve and justify him: *vae victis* is the noble English motto in such cases. But if it turns out in the long struggle that Mr. Shaw is only more successful for the moment than I am, if my books and writings on Shakespeare have come to stay, then I can safely leave the task of judging Mr. Shaw to the future.

In any case I can console myself. It amused me years ago to see Mr. Shaw using scraps of my garments to cover his nakedness; he now struts about wearing my livery unashamed. I am delighted that so little of it makes him a complete suit. My wardrobe is still growing in spite of his predatory instincts, and he is welcome to as much of it as I have cast off and he can cut to fit.

But is this the best that Mr. Shaw can do with his astonishing quickness and his admirable gift of lucid, vigorous speech? Will he, who is not poor, always be under our tables for the crumbs? Why should he not share the feast, or, better still, make a feast of his own? Why does he not take himself in hand, and crush the virtue out of himself and distil it into some noble draught? The quintessence of Shaw would be worth having.

I can afford on this matter to be wholly frank and ingenuous, and admit that I am gratified by the ability of my first disciples. Any writer might be proud of having convinced men of original minds like Mr. Arnold Bennett, Mr. Richard Middleton, and Mr. Bernard Shaw of the truth of a theory so contrary to tradition as mine is and so contemptuous of authority: Shakespeare himself would have been proud of such admirers. And if Mr. Bernard Shaw has

done his best to share in the honour of the discovery, one must attribute his excess of zeal to the intensity of his admiration, and to the fact that he was perhaps even a little quicker than the others to appreciate the new view, or perhaps a little vainer even than most able men. In any case, Mr. Shaw's method of dealing with a new master must be contrasted with that of the professor who also annexed as much as he could of my early articles, and coolly asserted that he had had my ideas ten years before, leaving it to be inferred that he had concealed them carefully.

After all, the chief thing is, here is my play, and Mr. Shaw's will shortly make its appearance, and in time a true deliverance and judgment on the respective merits of them will be forthcoming.

A few words about this play of mine may be allowed me. It suffers from an extraordinary, and

perhaps extravagant, piety : I did not set out to write a great play on the subject. I wanted to give a dramatic picture of Shakespeare and his time ; but above all a true picture. It seemed to me that no one had the right to treat the life-story, the soul-tragedy of a Shakespeare as the mere stuff of a play. Within the limits of the truth, however, I did my best. The play, therefore, as a play is full of faults : it is as loosely put together as one of Shakespeare's own history plays, and the worst fault of it is not poverty of plot and weakness of construction ; it is also academic and literary in tone. Much of this is due to my love of the master. I have hardly put a word in Shakespeare's mouth which I could not justify out of his plays or sonnets. My excessive love of the man has been a hindrance to me as a playwright.

I daresay—in fact, I am sure—that it would be possible to write a great play on the subject,

and tell even more of the truth than I have here told ; but that could only be done if one knew that the play would be played and had leisure and encouragement to do one's best. The evil of our present civilisation, from the artist's point of view, is that he is compelled by the conditions to give of his second best, and be thankful if even this is lucky enough to earn him a living wage.

My book on Shakespeare was many years in type before it found a publisher ; my Shakespeare play was printed six years ago and has not yet been acted.

FRANK HARRIS.

London, 15th November, 1910.

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

ROBERT CECIL, LORD BURGHLEY

THE EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON

LORD WILLIAM HERBERT (afterwards Earl of Pembroke).

KINGSTON LACY, EARL OF LINCOLN, an Euphuist

SIR JOHN STANLEY

SIR WALTER RALEIGH

MASTER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

„ FRANCIS BACON

„ BEN JONSON

„ FLETCHER

„ RICHARD BURBAGE

„ MARSTON

„ CHETTLE, the prototype of Falstaff.

„ DEKKER

„ WILLIE HUGHES

„ SELDEN

DR. HALL, Shakespeare's son-in-law

MASTER FRY, the Host of the "Mitre "

QUEEN ELIZABETH

LADY RUTLAND, Sidney's sister

LADY JANE WROTH

LADY CYNTHIA DARREL

LADY JOAN NEVIL

MISTRESS MARY FITTON, Shakespeare's Love

„ VIOLET VERNON

„ QUINEY } Shakespeare's daughters

„ HALL, }

COURTIERS AND SERVANTS

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS LOVE

ACT I

SCENES I - VII *The Stage of the Globe Theatre.*
,, VIII-X *The Antechamber at Court*

ACT II

SCENES I - II *In the "Mermaid"*
,, III-VI *In the Gardens of St. James's
Palace by moonlight*

ACT III

SCENES I - IV *In the "Mitre" Tavern*
,, V - VI *A Room in Lord William
Herbert's Lodgings*

ACT IV

SCENES I - IV *In the "Mitre" Tavern*
,, V - VI *The Throne Room at Court*

THE EPILOGUE

SCENES I - II *A Bedchamber in SHAKESPEARE'S House at Stratford*

Time

*Acts I, II, III and IV take
place in the summer of 1598
The Epilogue in April, 1616*

ACT I

SCENE I.

The tiring-room behind the stage of the Globe theatre after a performance of "The Merchant of Venice."

[As the curtain goes up an attendant is discovered listening at door L. There is a noise to be heard as of persons leaving the theatre: as the door is thrown open the attendant moves aside. The Earl of Southampton, Lord Lacy, Sir John Stanley, Chapman, Dekker, Marston, Fletcher, John Selden and Burbage enter.]

SIR JOHN STANLEY :

[Flinging in.] What a foolish play ! And what a spendthrift merchant !

CHAPMAN :

Trivial, I found it. Trivial and silly.

LACY :

[With graceful gesture.] Most excellent in invention, liberal in conceit. The Jew a gem, a gem, I say—a balass ruby of rich Orient blood !

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DEKKER :

Pretty, perhaps, but tedious ! Tedious—as a rival's praise, eh, Chapman ?

SOUTHAMPTON :

Ah, Master Burbage, you outdid yourself as Shylock. When you sharpened the knife, we all shivered.

BURBAGE :

I'm much beholden to your lordship.

FLETCHER :

[*To Lord Lacy*] The scene between the lovers in the moonlight was not ill-conceived. That Lorenzo had something of Shakespeare in him.

LACY :

And Jessica ! The name's a perfume. A flower, Jessica, of most rare depicture, dear to fancy, responsive to a breath !

DEKKER :

[*Aside to Fletcher.*] Has the gull any meaning ?

SELDEN :

His words, Dekker, are like his dress : too choice for ease, too rich for service : but he's of great place, and friend to Essex.

FLETCHER :

[*To Southampton.*] The end's weak, and the merchant too much the saint.

DEKKER :

Saints are always tiresome unless they're martyred.

SOUTHAMPTON :

And detractors, unless they're witty.

LACY :

[*Reproachfully.*] A cannon-ball as a retort !
Fie, fie, my lord Southampton. A little salve of soft disdain obliterates the sting, and no one shoots at midges.

[*Enter Shakespeare, who takes a seat apart.*]

SOUTHAMPTON :

[*Moving aside, with Lacy, waves his hand to Shakespeare.*] Good ! good !

SIR JOHN STANLEY :

Give me an English play. Why can't we have a play where we thrash the Spaniards ? Curse Venice ! What's Venice to me ! [*Exit, accompanied by Marston and Dekker ; Fletcher and Chapman follow.*]

SCENE II.

CHETTLE :

[*To Shakespeare.*] Did ye hear that?

SHAKESPEARE :

No ! What?

CHETTLE :

The truth, Will—the truth in the mouth of a suckling ! They all want an English play and Falstaff. Without him, my lad, the spirit's out of the sack—all stale and flat.

SHAKESPEARE :

Would you have onions with every dish, Chettle, even with the sweets?

CHETTLE :

In faith 'tis a seasoning and healthy weed—and provokes thirst, go to ! But why can't you be gay, lad, gay as you used to be and write us another comedy with Falstaff and his atomy page?

SHAKESPEARE :

Laughter and youth go together, Chettle, and I am too old for comedies.

CHETTLE :

It makes my flesh creep to hear you ; but I'll not be sad : I'll not think of age and the end, I'll not—. Ah, lad, you'll never be popular without Falstaff.

SHAKESPEARE :

And why not?

CHETTLE :

'Tis his wit pleases the many.

SHAKESPEARE :

Wit !—when wit buys popularity, honesty shall win fortune, and constancy love : the golden days are long past, I fear. [*Turns from Chettle, who goes out, taking Burbage and Selden with him.*]

SCENE III.

SOUTHAMPTON :

The play was excellent.

LACY :

A carcanet of diverse colours—of absolute favour.

SOUTHAMPTON :

But the playwrights are not your friends.

SHAKESPEARE :

I have befriended most of them.

LACY :

A double reason for repugnance—ingratitude the point, envy the barb !

SOUTHAMPTON :

[*To Shakespeare.*] A fine play, Shakespeare, but you seem cast down. Is all well with you in your home?

SHAKESPEARE :

Thanks to you : more than well. My father's debts all paid ; the best house in the village bought for my mother——

SOUTHAMPTON :

Come, then, throw off this melancholy—'tis but a humour.

LACY :

And let the wit play like lightning against the clouds. Or, better still, exhort him, my lord, to seek a new love ; 'tis love that lifts to melody and song, and gives the birds their music.

SOUTHAMPTON :

You are often with Herbert, are you not?

SHAKESPEARE :

Yes.

SOUTHAMPTON :

Don't build too much on him ! You'll be deceived.

SHAKESPEARE :

To me he's perfect. In beauty a paragon, in wit unfellow'd.

SOUTHAMPTON :

I would not trust him ; he's selfish.

LACY :

Most insensitive-hard.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Turns to Lacy.*] Youth, youth, my lord ! We do not blame the unripe fruit for hardness ; a few sunny days will mellow it, and turn the bitter to juicy sweet.

SOUTHAMPTON :

What a friend you are, Shakespeare ! You find excuses for everyone.

LACY :

But those who trust too much are like the rathe flowers, frost-blighted.

SOUTHAMPTON :

Here comes Mistress Violet—we'll take leave of you. I was telling Shakespeare, lady, how fair you are.

SCENE IV.

VIOLET :

[*Curtsying.*] I thank you humbly, my lord.

[*Exit Southampton and Lacy bowing low.*]

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Smiling.*] At last, Violet.

VIOLET :

[*Moving to him and giving her mouth.*] Am I so late? Did I wrong to come?

SHAKESPEARE :

No, no !

VIOLET :

There was such a crowd I did not dare to come at first, and yet I could not stay away ; I could not. I wanted to tell you how wonderful it all was.

SHAKESPEARE :

I am glad it pleased you.

VIOLET :

"Pleased me!" What poor, cold words. The play was entrancing ; but you were the Merchant, were you not? And so sad. Why are you always sad now?

SHAKESPEARE :

I know not. As youth passes we see things as they are, and our high dreams of what might be become impossible.

VIOLET :

Never impossible, or we could not dream them.

SHAKESPEARE :

I hoped so once ; but now I doubt. How golden-fair you are !

VIOLET :

You are always kind ; but it's not kindness I want. I'd rather you were unkind and jealous. But you are never jealous, never unkind.

SHAKESPEARE :

You'd rather I were jealous—unkind?

VIOLET :

Much rather. 'Twould prove you care !

SHAKESPEARE :

Why do you shiver ?

VIOLET :

We women feel the winter before it comes,
like the birds.

SHAKESPEARE :

Women ! You sensitive child.

VIOLET :

Not a child when I think of you. I used to look at myself and imagine that some day a man would kiss me and play with me and make a toy of me, and I wondered whether I should like it ; but I never dreamed that I would ever want to touch a man. But now, I love to be near you ; my King, how good it is to be with you. But the winter's coming. [*Shivers.*]

SHAKESPEARE :

You must not think that, Violet, nor say it. It's your love breeds those fears.

VIOLET :

[*Pouting.*] Why did you not put me in this play ?

SHAKESPEARE :

I did : you know I did. You were Jessica, happy, loving Jessica, and I, Lorenzo, ran away with you and talked of music and the stars by moonlight in front of Portia's house.

VIOLET :

How kind you are ! What a pity you don't love me ! But then love is always one-sided, they say. Ah, some day—— Who's Portia ?

SHAKESPEARE :

Portia ?

VIOLET :

[*Rouses herself.*] Yes, Portia. Who were you thinking of when you described Portia ? She's one of your new friends, I suppose, one of the great Court ladies. H'm ! They're no better than we are. Some of them were at the play but now talking with Kempe, the clown. Ladies, indeed ! trulls would behave better.

SHAKESPEARE :

My gentle Violet, in a rage.

VIOLET :

Oh, they make me angry. Why can't they be noble ? I mean pure and sweet and gentle,

instead of laughing loud and using coarse words like those women did to-day. Was Portia one of them?

SHAKESPEARE :

No, Violet, no. I meant Portia to be a great lady. Her carriage and manner I took from someone I once saw at a distance—a passing glance: but the wit and spirit I had no model for, none.

VIOLET :

You will love one of them, I know. Perhaps, by speaking of it, I put the thought into your head, and bring the danger nearer; but I cannot help it.

SHAKESPEARE :

Love is its torment.

VIOLET :

Oh, dear, dear! You will not leave me altogether, will you? Even if you love her, you will let me see you sometimes. No one will ever love you as I do. I only love myself because you like me, and when you leave me, I'll fall out of conceit with my face, and hate it. Hateful face, that could not please my lord.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Puts his hand on her shoulder.*] Vain torment !
In this frail hooped breast love flutters and
bruises herself like a bird in a cage.

VIOLET :

When you are near, the pain turns to joy.

SHAKESPEARE :

I know ; I know, so well. I'm making you
the heroine of the new play I told you of—
"Twelfth Night" ; your name, too, shall be hers,
Viola ; but now you must go : I hear them
coming.

VIOLET :

Farewell, Farewell. If I could only be a dozen
women to please you, so that you might not think
of Portia, hateful Portia ! [Exit Violet.]

SCENE V.

BURBAGE :

[*Entering hurriedly.*] Farce and tragedy and escape. A play within a play.

FLETCHER :

[*Enters just behind him, followed by Dekker, Marston, Chettle and Hughes.*] A great scene ! The revolt of the groundlings. Didn't you hear them shouting, Shakespeare ?

SHAKESPEARE :

I heard nothing.

FLETCHER :

Self-absorbed as ever.

DEKKER :

[*Sneeringly.*] Lost on Parnassus !

SHAKESPEARE :

What was it, Fletcher ?

FLETCHER :

A scene for Dekker. The orange-girls have been pelting the ladies in their rooms. The ladies giped at them, and they replied with rotten fruit. The ladies shrieked, and hid themselves ;

all but one, who stood in front and outfaced the furies—a queen!

SHAKESPEARE :

Are they safe? Where are they now?

BURBAGE :

The lords Southampton and Lacy are bringing them : here they come.

[Enter three ladies, masked, and Lords Southampton and Lacy, followed by Selden.]

SCENE VI.

LACY :

At length Beauty's piloted to the safety of the stage. And without straining extolment I proclaim that never did lady *[bowing to the tallest]* show more innocence of fear, more exornation of composure.

MISS FITTON :

Why should one fear an orange or an angry slut ! Is this part of the stage? *[Looking round.]*

LACY :

The veritable and singular stage of the renowned Globe, where actors, playwrights, poets fleet the hours with rich discourse and jewelled melodies.

MISS FITTON :

And naughty stories, I'll be sworn.

SOUTHAMPTON :

If you'll unhood, ladies, we'll present new courtiers to you, Princes of this realm.

[The ladies hesitate.]

MISS FITTON :

[Stands out and swings back her hood.] That's soon done ! Ouf ! *[Lets her eyes range.]*

LADY JANE WROTH :

'Tis easy for you, Mary, but I'm all in a twitter, and red like a cit's wife.

LADY RUTLAND :

Mary's right : if you're going into the water you may as well jump in. *[Throws back her hood.]* But how they stare !

LACY :

Pray, my lord, officiate.

SOUTHAMPTON :

As Master o' Ceremonies, then, I make it known to all that Lady Rutland and Lady Jane Wroth, and Mistress Mary Fitton, the youngest and bravest of the Queen's maids of honour, are new come to the Globe. Ladies, this is Master Burbage, who counterfeits kings with such nobility, and lovers with such reverence, that ladies lend him their lips in either part. And this is gentle Shakespeare, the wittiest of poets, whose sugared verses make all in love with sweets. And this is Master Chettle, playwright and Prince of Laughter. Here, too, is grave young Selden, and Masters Fletcher, Dekker, Marston, the glories of our stage.

LACY :

And now, gentlemen, with what most cunning art or inviolate mystery will you charm the visiting fair? Thrones, there, thrones, the ladies will sit.

MISS FITTON :

[*As they sit down.*] But where is Master Kempe, the clown? I want to see him dance. I swear when he takes the floor in the *Coranto* and mimics dignity, I could die of laughing. He

did not come with us! Oh, what a lack: we might have seen him jig.

LACY:

Shall we seduce your ears with vocal harmonies, fair lady, or chant in the round to lute or viol?

SOUTHAMPTON:

Will you, Shakespeare, sing first? [*Shakespeare, as if speechless, with a gesture of the hand, draws back, still gazing at Miss Fitton. Southampton turns to Miss Fitton.*] Shall it be a song of love or war?

MISS FITTON:

I prefer fighting or laughing to languishing.

LADY JANE WROTH:

[*Affectedly.*] And I love—women were made for love.

LADY RUTLAND:

Any song for a single voice.

MARSTON:

[*To Fletcher.*] A song, Fletcher!

FLETCHER :

Most willingly ; here's a song : but young Hughes must sing it or Selden : my voice is rough.

[*Young Hughes takes up the viol, and sings.*]

CHETTLE :

[*After the first verse.*] And now, ladies, what will ye drink—canary or sack?

LADY JANE WROTH :

I'll take Charnikoe, I think ; the wine of Bourdeaux, you know : 'tis all the fashion now.

MISS FITTON :

I ought to have been born a man and not a girl, for I like sack, it's strong and sweet !

[*Lady Rutland waives off the wine.*]

CHETTLE :

Oh, she's a rare one ; what say you, Will, rig-gish, eh?

SHAKESPEARE :

[*To Chettle.*] Hush ! Hush !

MISS FITTON :

[*Calls Hughes to her.*] Here, boy, Lady Jane says you're pretty and your voice sweet. [*Aside.*]

Prove to her that your lips are as soft as her cheek.

[*Hughes kisses Lady Jane Wroth. All laugh.*]

LADY WROTH :

[*Affectedly.*] No, no, I prithee ! [*She yields to the kiss, and then to Miss Fitton.*] I don't know, Mary, how you dare. At your age I'd have died of shame to speak of lips and cheeks to a man.

MISS FITTON :

But you'd have thought all the more, eh, Jane? And thoughts leap to act without the aid of speech. Have I touched you there? Ha! ha! [*Hughes sings another verse.*]

[*Loud applause. Hughes comes across to Miss Fitton.*]

MISS FITTON :

Be bold, boy; be bold always! If I had been a man I'd have kissed every woman that took my fancy, maid or matron. Even when they don't love you, they're proud of the tribute. [*Hughes bends suddenly, and kisses her on the lips. Disengaging herself.*] By my faith, an apt pupil. [*Rising.*] But I fear we must be going.

[*To Southampton and Lacy.*] We'll come again, my lords, if we may.

BURBAGE :

Won't you look at the other rooms, ladies, before you go? You should see everything !

MISS FITTON :

[*Looking at the others.*] We shall be late, I fear ; but a few minutes—— [*Ladies follow Burbage.*]

SOUTHAMPTON :

Why so silent, Shakespeare? Why would you not sing? You seem lost.

SHAKESPEARE :

Lost in finding Portia——

SOUTHAMPTON :

Portia? What do you mean? Do you come with us?

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Shakes his head.*] No, No ! I'll wait here.

[*Southampton and others exeunt after the ladies: Shakespeare alone.*]

SCENE VII.

HERBERT :

[*Comes in hastily.*] How was the end received?
A success—I'm sure.

SHAKESPEARE :

A babel, Herbert, as usual. Not enough clowning, Chettle says, and the general echo him.

HERBERT :

The dull clods have no eyes for beauty, no ears for poetry. I had to go before the end ; you forgive me? The play was splendid, one line a miracle—"How all the other passions fleet to air"—[*putting his hand on Shakespeare's shoulder*]-but now I must be off to Court to persuade the old harpy to "order" the performance of the "Merry Wives." But you're not listening.

SHAKESPEARE :

Thinking. You might do something else for me at Court.

HERBERT :

Anything, at Court or in Hades, 'tis only another name for the same place.

SHAKESPEARE :

There was here but now a Maid-of-Honour,
Mistress Mary Fitton ; do you know her ?

HERBERT :

A Maid-of-Honour, here ! Alone ? [*Laughs.*]

SHAKESPEARE :

No, Lady Rutland, Sidney's sister, and Lady
Jane Wroth were with her.

HERBERT :

She must be new, I don't know her. Was she
dark or fair ? Tall or short ?

SHAKESPEARE :

Eye to eye with me. Dark as night, and as
night mysterious, wonderful.

HERBERT :

This at first sight ! But what can I do ?

SHAKESPEARE :

Speak for me to her. Say what you can : that
motley is not my proper wear, that I'm not all an
actor lost to shame and dignity, that—but you
will find a thousand better words. Had I to
plead for you in such a cause, the unsentient and
inconstant air should ache for love of you.

HERBERT :

I'll do my best. Had Southampton any news?

SHAKESPEARE :

That Raleigh still inflames the Queen against the Irish.

HERBERT :

We'll make short work of him; he's staled with use. The Queen laughs at him. I want her to hear your play, and to give you a place with the Lord Chamberlain as Master of the Revels—Judge accredited of plays and players! Leave it to me, my friend! I'll kiss her lips and praise her legs till she does all we want. Our star is climbing up—up!

SHAKESPEARE :

Your old loving thought for me—but who climbs should go light, and not be burdened with another's weight.

HERBERT :

You're easily carried! I'll bring you tidings later, if I encounter with your gipsy—Ha! Ha!—Farewell [*Turns at the door and comes back.*] But why should you not plead your own cause?

SHAKESPEARE :

How? Where? This stage is far from Court.

HERBERT :

That's nothing ; desire will bridge the broadest river. There's to be a masque at Court to-morrow afternoon. Come, then, and meet your fair.

SHAKESPEARE :

Without right—or command?

HERBERT :

The Lord Chamberlain will send an invitation to any friend of mine : I need not name you.

SHAKESPEARE :

But if by chance it becomes known——

HERBERT :

'Twill not be known. Half the guests will be masked ; some of the girls, I hear, will be dressed as pages, foresters ; I know not what. You will not be noted. Now I must be gone. Farewell, masker, may you have merry hours.

[*Exit Herbert.*]

[*Enter, crossing stage from L. to C., the ladies, still accompanied by Southampton, Lacy and Burbage.*]

SOUTHAMPTON :

[*While the ladies are cloaking at the door.*]
What think you of our Court ladies, Shakespeare?

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Gazing at Mistress Fitton.*] What pride and—

SOUTHAMPTON :

You mean the tall, dark girl? Mary Fitton ; a rare wench. Do you think her beautiful? Some say she's too dark.

SHAKESPEARE :

She is all the beauty extant !

SCENE VIII.

The Antechamber at Court. Two girls, dressed as gentleman and page—Mistress Mary Fitton and Lady Cynthia Darrel—are talking together at one end of the room, L. Sir Walter Raleigh as Captain of the Guard is standing by the great door, R.

HERBERT :

[*Enters, R.C.*] Nothing yet, Captain?

RALEIGH :

Nothing, my lord.

HERBERT :

[*Impatiently.*] Hum ! [*Goes on down the room and bows to Miss Fitton.*] I've not seen you before, lady, and yet I swear I know you.

LADY CYNTHIA DARREL :

That were difficult ; my friend's new come to Court.

HERBERT :

And yet I'd wager it is Mistress Mary Fitton. [*Bows to her and half whispers.*] And yester even with Lady Rutland—[*louder*] shall I say where?

MISS FITTON :

You may, my lord ; the place is innocent. 'Tis the intent makes guilt.

HERBERT :

You were where my friend saw you, and lost his heart. If you found it, guard it well : he's worthier than his place.

MISS FITTON :

Men only praise what they wish to part with, or think beneath them.

HERBERT :

You're witty, lady !

MISS FITTON :

Wit's the Christian name for sense, at Court.

HERBERT :

May not one praise his friend ?

MISS FITTON :

Never to a woman !

HERBERT :

Why not ?

MISS FITTON :

Who praise the friend, dispraise the woman.

HERBERT :

You're too persuaded to be changed. Lady Cynthia, the Mistress of the Robes has sent me for you; may I give you conduct to her? [*To Miss Fitton, bowing.*] Would you be seated lady? [*Pointing to a seat.*] Your page will be returned before you've missed her. [*Bows low. They go off, R.C.*]

SCENE IX.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Enters, L., with a mask in his hand, and stops on catching sight of Miss Fitton.*] Ah !

MISS FITTON :

[*Looking at him over her shoulder.* Oh, the poet ! Well, Master Shakespeare, what think you of my dress?

SHAKESPEARE :

Yesterday, lady, you were lovely; to-day, bewitching.

MISS FITTON :

There is more of the man than the woman in me, I think : yet I would this cloak were somewhat longer. [*She tries to draw it round her to cover her legs ; failing in this she stands up and swings it about her.*] There, I am at ease now. Does it set me off ?

SHAKESPEARE :

As envious cloud that veils the beauty of Night's Queen.

MISS FITTON :

[*Seating herself and drawing the cloak about her.*] I don't like poetry : it's not true—sincere. You poets are too much in love with phrases to be honest.

SHAKESPEARE :

When the heart is full we unpack it in song, like the birds.

MISS FITTON :

But when the bird really feels—rage or fear, he shrieks or twitters and forgets his song.

SHAKESPEARE :

He still sings his love.

MISS FITTON :

I'd not give a cross [*Snaps her fingers*] for love that keeps time. What's formal and composed's a pleasure—not a passion. I want prose and truth.

SHAKESPEARE :

Yet they say that men love truth—and women, honeyed flatteries !

MISS FITTON :

[*Scornfully.*] They say ! Men say that ; but it is worse than false. No sooner is a man in love than he lies, wheedles, pretends, shows off—for all the world like the peacock in the garden yonder, that sidles round with tail outspread, in stately sweepings. But when we women fall to love, we are too honest to be vain—too fond for make-believe.

SHAKESPEARE :

Those are the signs of love in man, as in woman. But who made you wise, so young ?

MISS FITTON :

Mother Eve, I suppose. The greenest girl knows more about love than your graybeard.

SHAKESPEARE :

True.

MISS FITTON :

[*Settling herself, and pointing to the seat.*]
You may liken me to night if it please you. We dark women are out of favour now : red hair is the Queen's colour, and Beauty's ensign : bleached locks, even, are preferred to brown or black.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Taking the chair, and leaning towards her.*] I must have been born red, then, to love your great dark eyes, and the coils and tresses of your hair.

MISS FITTON :

[*Pouting.*] Do you believe people must like their opposites in colour and height and ——

SHAKESPEARE :

Such a difference is only one strand in the tie ; and in a true marriage the mind, I think, is more than the body.

MISS FITTON :

Of course the mind and character have something to do with it—the sauce to the sweet : but the body's the sweet.

SHAKESPEARE :

When I am with you, I think so too. I cannot reason now, I can only feel. I saw you yesterday for the first time, a few poor minutes ; and now you are with me again and time is fleeting. Oh, I want fifty eyes to take in your beauties, fifty ears to catch the music of your voice, fifty hands to touch you, fifty lives to show you how I love——

MISS FITTON :

[*Draws up.*] Love ! love is not so sudden-mad—
But hush ! [*She takes up a mirror to hide her face ; Shakespeare masks ; a page crosses stage rapidly from L. to R.*]

MISS FITTON :

[*Putting down the mirror.*] And so you love me—madly—in an hour ?

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Taking off the mask.*] Ah, lady, Time is love's plaything—now he presses years into one look, one touch ; and now a moment's kiss swoons out of count—will you not yield to love's magic ?

MISS FITTON :

I don't think I love easily. But why do you love me?

SHAKESPEARE :

Your beauty, grace, courage, wit—a thousand reasons ; but deeper than all reason and higher is love's throne.

MISS FITTON :

We have a saying in my country, " quick flame soon cold."

SHAKESPEARE :

Ah, that's not true in love ; proverbs are never true ; they are all made by dullards for the dull, but tell me how shall I win you? Teach me. Like a timid scholar I've forgotten all I knew. Will love win love?

MISS FITTON :

Love will keep us when won ; I have no philtre for the winning.

SHAKESPEARE :

One thing you must believe : this love is all my life.

MISS FITTON :

I'll believe it sooner than I confess I do ; for I love to hear you say it. A constant lover, you know, touches every woman's heart.

SHAKESPEARE :

Then I shall win you, sweet !

MISS FITTON :

Perhaps : all women want to love and be loved. Men desire beauty, wealth, power, honours ; we want nothing but love, love only : love is our religion. You see the doublet and hose have not changed my disposition. But Lady Cynthia will be here soon — - no longer
[Rises.]

SHAKESPEARE :

When am I to see you again and where ? I only live for the hope of seeing you, and now I've been with you and said nothing—nothing !

MISS FITTON :

Hist ! [*Moves behind the spinet again : Shakespeare follows. Lady Jane Wroth and Lady Rutland cross stage from L.C. to L.*]

LADY JANE WROTH :

Oh, Lord Herbert is wonderful. As he came

from the Queen he met me at the door of the ante-chamber : I stopped to let him pass : he drew me to him and kissed me on the lips. I could not help it. Do you think he means anything?

LADY RUTLAND :

Not he. Herbert ! He means you are a girl and pretty. Take care, Jane ; broken hearts come from such kissings.

LADY JANE WROTH :

But why should he want to kiss me if he does not love me?

LADY RUTLAND :

Men love to-kiss, dear, and we kiss because we love—that's the difference.

LADY JANE WROTH :

I wish I were a man, for I love the kiss, too.

LADY RUTLAND :

Hush, dear, hush ! you must not say that : if you were overheard—[*Glances round nervously : they go off L.*]

MISS FITTON :

The silly women ! [*To Shakespeare.*] But why do you love so madly ? 'Tis not wise.

SHAKESPEARE :

Wisdom and love, sweet, are sworn enemies.

MISS FITTON :

[*Rising.*] I have many faults : if you knew them all, you might not love me.

SHAKESPEARE :

Faults ! you have no faults !

MISS FITTON :

[*Gravely.*] I'm too tall, and I look twenty-five though I'm only seventeen. Then my nose is not quite straight—do you see ? [*Holds up her face.*] Besides, I'm very proud and hot-tempered—vain ! No : I'm not vain, ever.

SHAKESPEARE :

Delightful wretch ! [*Puts his hands on her shoulders.*] Now girlish-gay and now so witty-wise ; but always adorable.

MISS FITTON :

[*Holding his hands away by the wrists.*] I'm

very proud, you know, and want the truth always. I'd never forgive you if you deceived me.

SHAKESPEARE :

Who could deceive you? Give me your love and I'll be true as hand to heart. [*She puts her hand on his shoulder: he lays his hand on her outstretched arm and gazes in her eyes.*] Your beauty comes upon my soul like music ravishing the sense. How I adore you. [*Kneels.*] You make me humble: I seem a thing of naught and you a Queen—divine—[*She stoops and kisses his forehead; in a sort of exaltation he cries:*] Now life begins anew for me; this hour is consecrate——

MISS FITTON :

[*Putting her finger to her lips and glancing at the canopy.*] You must go and so must I. Hush ! Farewell. [*Goes off, L.C. Shakespeare looks after her, takes a step as if to follow her, and then goes off hurriedly L.*]

SCENE X.

HERBERT :

[*Enters, R. : walks to Raleigh.*] Was my name taken to the Queen, Captain?

RALEIGH :

[*Very courteously.*] Yes, my lord, some time since, when first you entered.

HERBERT :

An hour ago, surely !

RALEIGH :

[*Laughing.*] Not half, my lord. Time lags when we wait.

HERBERT :

Time ! Time is for slaves : an hour for this, an hour for that. Curse time, a slut that lends herself to every basest use. [*Throws himself into a seat. Insolently.*] What was the answer?

RALEIGH :

Answer ! my lord !

HERBERT :

[*Insolently.*] Yes, when my name went in.

RALEIGH :

There was no answer. [*Long pause, while Herbert beats his leg with his glove.*]

HERBERT :

[*Rising.*] Prithee send in again, Captain, to say I wait. I've ridden fast to be in time, and now—I'm chilled.

RALEIGH :

The Queen's in Council, my lord, with Lord Burghley and the Spanish ambassador; I dare not interrupt her !

HERBERT :

Dare is for a servant, not for a Raleigh.

RALEIGH :

A Raleigh is proud to serve his Queen.

HERBERT :

A very proper spirit in him. But prithee, send in my name again—I like not waiting.

RALEIGH :

I pray you not to ask that.

HERBERT :

[*Rising.*] But I do ask it, man, I do. I'm sick of waiting. On me be all the blame. I'll bear you out in it.

RALEIGH :

I'm on duty here, my lord, and may not yield my office to another !

HERBERT :

[*Going to him.*] Don't lesson me, but do your office.

RALEIGH :

You may be sure I shall.

HERBERT :

[*Making as if to push past him.*] Then remove, remove, or go in.

RALEIGH :

[*Bars the way.*] I'm here to protect the Queen's privacy, not to annoy her.

HERBERT :

Servants should obey, not talk.

RALEIGH :

To be pert is a boy's privilege.

HERBERT :

Damn your privilege. [*Strikes him. Raleigh's sword flashes out: Herbert draws too. At this moment the door opens and discovers the Queen.*]

QUEEN ELIZABETH :

Fighting ! Here ! [*Raleigh bows composedly, and steps back. Herbert flings his sword on the ground and throws himself on one knee before her.*]

HERBERT :

What better thing on earth to fight for, than a sight of you, my Queen ! [*Queen lifts him, smiling as the curtain falls.*]

ACT II

SCENE I.

At the Mermaid. Ben Jonson is standing at the end of the room, i.e., Fletcher and Lord Lacy near him. Marston and Dekker are with Chapman in the middle. Chettle is seated, R., facing Jonson. Shakespeare enters behind Chettle, door R.

JONSON :

[*Stretching.*] It's good to be free—free to feast, and not feed like a dog—free! That prison was killing me. [*Calling out as Shakespeare enters.*] Ho, Will! here's your chair, yawning till you come.

CHETTLE :

Here's one with jaws as thirsty-wide, my lad, and dry to boot. Will you fill 'em?

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Passing Chettle with a smile.*] The stranger first, Chettle, then the drink. I've not seen Ben for months and months. [*Goes to Jonson and takes both his hands.*]

BEN JONSON :

[*Pushing a chair towards Shakespeare.*] And now little poet, what will you drink? Canary or sack. [*Claps his hands.*] Here, Drawer !

SHAKESPEARE :

I'm ill with thirst, and for that disease there's no medicine like small beer.

JONSON :

[*To drawer.*] Bring beer.

CHETTLE :

Have sack, Shakespeare, sack's the drink : when sack goes in, wit comes out. Beer's cold and thin, fit for young girls, who quake to think of lovers ; but sack's rich and generous, breeds courage and self-content ; equals the poor man to kings, and kings to gods.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*To Jonson.*] A little more, and he'd rise into measure.

JONSON :

Out of measure, you mean ; the verse is my part. Curious how abstinence breeds desire, and

desire song. Try prison for six months, Will, and your mouth will drip with longing for wine, women and good company. Ah, the leaden hours !

CHETTLE :

Ho ! ho ! my lad of the mountain. No prison needed by the godly. Without provocation or incitement I want women often, good company always, wine perpetually. It's very strange : I've often had too much sack, often ; but enough, never. Read me that riddle, Shakespeare !

SHAKESPEARE :

That desire, Chettle, still outlives performance, is no riddle. [*Turning to Jonson.*] Your punishment punished all of us, Ben.

DEKKER :

And all for killing an actor.

SELDON :

In fair duello, too : allowed since the Norman time.

LACY :

[*With gestures.*] Was it a punto, Ben, or a

reverso, an imbrocato or a montanto that reached the throne of life?

DEKKER :

[*Half maliciously.*] Or did a mere downright passada thrust poor Spencer from the stage?

JONSON :

[*Menacingly.*] 'Twas a cudgel Downright used on Bobadill : don't forget that, Cobbler !

DEKKER :

'Tis as good a trade as bricklaying, and gives more time for thought.

MARSTON :

Was it a Toledo, Ben, or a long Fleming gave the mortal wound?

[*Jonson rises, crying " You dog ! " Lord Lacy on one side, and Shakespeare on the other, hold him back, and constrain him to sit.*]

LACY :

Amity, friends, amity !

SHAKESPEARE :

Every man in his humour, Ben ; who should know that better than you?

JONSON :

[*Sits again, grumbling.*] The curs, who bark and run.

LACY :

Let's have a hanap, friends, to cool the embers of strife.

CHETTLE :

One cup of sack, Shakespeare, to chase your melancholy and start your wit.

SHAKESPEARE :

Not one. Sweet wine on bitter beer would make me Chettle. [*Turns to Jonson.*] So you became a Catholic in prison, Ben. Was it the loneliness, or fasting?

JONSON :

Loneliness, perhaps : in solitude one listens to the heart.

MARSTON [*Interrupting.*]

That's weak, Jonson, childish-weak. Solitude breeds religion as the dark breeds devils—out of fear,

DEKKER :

Religion's a trade to the priest, an intrigue to women, to men a laughing-stock.

CHETTLE :

Don't say that, don't blaspheme, don't attack the Faith, mad lads ! I always mean to repent, but put off the evil day of reformation so long as health lasts. Conscience and sack struggle in me for the mastery, and the conflict makes me thirsty and so sack wins. But no scorers or blasphemers, say I.

SHAKESPEARE :

We're all godly at heart ; eh, Chettle ? We all wish other men virtuous, so that there'll be more frolic for us.

CHETTLE :

Ha ! Ha ! You're right, lad ! [*To the drawer.*] Another cup, you bodkin, you radish, you—Ah, we are all sinners, Will, villainous sinners ! [*He drinks.*]

SELDEN :

I incline to the new faith. These puritans are much in earnest, though they go too far. One of

them told me of late that actors should be outlawed, for they were not mentioned in the Bible.
[Laughs.]

CHETTLE :

[*Interrupting.*] Why didn't you reply that tailors weren't mentioned there, either, and so the crophead knave himself should go naked.

MARSTON :

Wonder of wonders ! Chettle is learned in the Scriptures.

LACY :

Our catechist in pious phrases, man, our doctor of divinity.

DEKKER :

He knows more of tavern reckonings ! He ! He !

CHETTLE :

Why not, lad, why not ? The animal man must keep a balance.

SELDEN :

Religion is like the fashion ; one man wears his doublet slashed, another laced, another plain, but every man has a doublet and a religion.

CHAPMAN :

[*Pompously.*] 'Tis easy to mock at things sacred ; but without religion there'd be no society. Be Protestant or Catholic, as you will ; but without either we'd fall into anarchia.

JONSON :

Hum ! I don't know—What do you say, Shakespeare?

SHAKESPEARE :

If all our rushlights went out, the sun would still be shining.

LACY :

Oh, Shakespeare ! What a blessed union of wit and poetry like virtue and beauty in a maid or a Toledo blade hafted to one Chrysolite.

CHETTLÉ :

I have a story, Ben, my bully boy, that you've not heard yet, a story of Will Shakespeare. Dick Burbage knows it. Ha ! Ha !

MARSTON :

If new, let's hear it.

DEKKER :

If old, it's better than Chapman's mouthing.

CHETTLE :

The pretty mercer's wife, who often has a room to see the play, made a meeting with King Richard III, Dick Burbage, there. Quiet Will overheard the appointment, and after the play followed the lady. Poor Dick, having to change his robes, came late, and knocked. "Who's there?" asked Will, from the inside. "Richard III," whispered Dick. "Ah," quoth Will, "Richard III comes after William the Conqueror." Ho ! ho ! ho !

SELDEN :

So the sportive blood of youth beflecks the dignity of manhood !

DEKKER :

'Tis too pat to be true.

FLETCHER :

We poets are all given to Venus.

CHAPMAN :

How true that Venus story is, and how beauti-

ful. We shall never equal the Greeks; never; they were our masters in everything.

CHETTLE :

Masters indeed ! Here's Shakespeare would put down any of them in anything.

JONSON :

I'm not sure of that, Chettle. The Agamemnon's a great play.

CHETTLE :

Ay, but what say you to Henry IV. ! That's the play for me. I warrant the Greeks had nothing like Falstaff. What d'ye say, Shakespeare? Stand for your own, my boy !

JONSON :

He lacks the language, the window through which the Greeks must be studied.

CHETTLE :

It's wit, man, ye want, not knowledge. Come, Will. Put the Briton above the Greek : I'll tarre you on.

SHAKESPEARE :

I think the Greeks are over praised. Fancy

making Love an inferior goddess, born of salt water. ["Ho! Ho!" *laughs Chettle.*] Love's born of summer air and light; flowers are her footprints and the stars sing to her coming: Venus, not Jupiter, reigns in Heaven and Earth.

JONSON :

[*Interrupting.*] Good, old Knowell, good! But let's have a toast, or you'll talk us all to death. Here's to the ever-sacred memory of our great Queen, who lets players and playwrights live in spite of Puritans and preachers.

FLETCHER :

To the Virgin who beat the Spaniards, and made Britain mistress of the seas.

DEKKER :

In the same way the dog made the dinner, for he looked on, while men feasted.

SELDEN :

Hush, hush! No disloyalty!

CHETTLE :

[*Puts down the empty pot.*] I'll drink to no virgin, my roaring boys, not even in name.

Obstruction's twin brother to Destruction—I'll none of it. Long live life ! Here's to the Queen's great father, Henry VIII. There's a man for you : could eat like a man, and drink like a man, and love like a man. He was a king, if you like. Here's to his memory !

JONSON :

You can have him all to yourself, Chettle, your many-wived hero.

CHETTLE :

Tut, man, he was the eighth Harry, and had a right to eight wives. 'Tis the Scripture. [*Drinks.*]

DEKKER :

Chettle's drunk.

SHAKESPEARE :

Chettle's right : here's to the memory of Henry VIII, who gave wine to the laity, and women to the clergy.

[*All drink, laughing. Messenger enters, and speaks to Jonson, who rises hastily.*]

JONSON :

Here's my friend, Francis Bacon, come to see us.

CHETTLE :

Bring him in, lad : Shakespeare here'll [*Exit Jonson*] teach him what he can't find in law-books.

[*Jonson meets Bacon at the door.*]

SCENE II.

BACON :

[*To Jonson, with hand outstretched.*] Hearing of your discharge, I hastened to find you and share your joy, though alack ! I was too weak to obtain your release.

JONSON :

That's kind of you. Let me present my friends. This is young Fletcher, the poet, and Burbage whom you know, and Master Shakespeare, the best playwright of us all. And this, gentlemen, is Master Francis Bacon, the great philosopher.

SHAKESPEARE :

And friend to my lord of Essex.

BACON :

[*Turning to Shakespeare.*] Yes : do you know the Earl?

SHAKESPEARE :

By the kindness of Lord Southampton, 'so far
as a poor poet may.

JONSON :

He'll win Lord Burghley's place or fall to ruin.
But I fear his violence and wild courses.

BACON :

When Lord Essex comes to power, he will act
more soberly. Great men are like the heavenly
bodies ; they move violently to their places, and
calmly in their places.

SHAKESPEARE :

True, true ! His violence is all of quick feeling :
at heart he is most generous-kind.

BACON :

You do not overpraise him ; yet on troubled sea,
small sails of will and temper are the safest.

SHAKESPEARE :

Lord Essex is too great to think of safety ; he
dreams of noble deeds, and does them.

BACON :

[*After pausing.*] Your praise does you credit ;

it shall be reported to the Earl. But I came to greet Jonson, and hear his new song : I must soon be on my way.

SELDEN :

[*To Fletcher.*] Curious, the two masters can neither wrestle nor embrace : Bacon's on earth, Shakespeare in the clouds.

FLETCHER :

[*Not listening.*] Let us go into the inner room : we shall hear the music better. [*All go inside save Shakespeare and Jonson. Music is heard through the open door.*]

JONSON :

[*Turning to Shakespeare.*] So you are in love, I hear. Oh, that urchin, Cupid ! But beware, Will, beware ; his darts are all poisoned.

[*Takes Shakespeare's arm, and draws him towards the inner room.*]

SHAKESPEARE :

What sweet poison !

SCENE III.

In the grounds of St. James's Palace by moonlight. A marquee in centre of stage with throne. Miss Fitton moves about in garden, L., as if looking for something till Shakespeare enters, L.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Taking both her hands.*] At last ! at last, I see and hold you, [*Holding both her hands to his heart.*] and all is well again ; the pain is gone.

MISS FITTON :

Pain ?

SHAKESPEARE :

Intense pain—the misery of doubt and fear ; the agony of disappointment—all vanished now, lost in a sea of pure delight. Ah, what a life ecstatic after death——

MISS FITTON :

Death !

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Gravely.*] Worse. On Monday you were

to be at Lady Rutland's; you had promised; I went; you were not there; I fell into the abysm of despair. Why, my queen, why?

MISS FITTON :

[*Smiling and seating herself.*] “ Affairs of state ” would sound well for a queen; but I prefer the truth. [*Solemnly.*] A three-piled ruff, the newest thing in neckgear, made me forget your coming. You see your queen is very woman. [*He kisses her hand and she pushes his head up gently.*] One of Eve's unnumbered daughters.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Kneeling.*] The wittiest of all, the most adored, the fairest ! Your hand [*lifting it in his*] is warm ivory, so firm and smooth [*looks up at her*—the eyes like wells o’erhung with shadow—and oh, the rubious lips. [*Puts up his hand and draws down her head; she bends and kisses him; then rises.*]

MISS FITTON :

You must rise; we might be seen : we have only half an hour; be careful; someone might come.

MISS FITTON :

Ah, love is easy when one can trust. I must tell you something, though I hate to : I'm very jealous.

SHAKESPEARE :

You, jealous !

MISS FITTON :

[*Nods her head.*] Jane Wroth told us of the dance at the Globe Theatre, and I was angry ; that's why I did not go to Lady Rutland's to meet you. I was jealous, mad !

SHAKESPEARE :

You had no reason. I was not at the dance. I came past you here and wandered in Chelsea meadows.

MISS FITTON :

In truth? How strange !

SHAKESPEARE :

I have always loved to be alone. In unfrequented woods I used to build myself a world of dreams and hold a court of fancied creatures. But now the dreams have changed to memories ; you

come to me and I recall your words and looks and beauties ; kiss your hands and eyes and lips. Oh, my thought-world is paradise with you as goddess-queen.

MISS FITTON :

You must never make me jealous. Heal that at once as you would heal a pain of mine. It makes some women love more, I think ; it would kill all love in me. I am too proud to endure its sting.

SHAKESPEARE :

I will never give you cause, sweet, for jealousy, never ! I love your pride too well.

MISS FITTON :

[*Rising and going to the spinet.*] You promised me a song. Did you forget?

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Following her.*] Could I forget a promise to you ! [*He puts the roll on the spinet before her.*]

MISS FITTON :

I cannot sing it, you know. I have none of women's little graces.

SHAKESPEARE :

Being grace itself, you can forego graces. But I have Hughes without, if you will hear him.

MISS FITTON :

Willingly ; but he must not stay long. [*While Shakespeare goes away, L., she reads the words aloud.*] “ I am my own fever, my own fever and pain.”

[*Shakespeare returns with Hughes, who bows to Miss Fitton. Miss Fitton nods negligently, and leaves the spinet, taking a seat, L. C. Shakespeare stands at her side, facing the audience, while Hughes sings.*]

HUGHES [*Sings.*]

“ I attempt from Love’s sickness to fly in vain,
 Since I am myself, my own fever,
 Since I am myself, my own fever and pain ;
 No more now, no more now, fond heart, with
 pride should we swell,
 Thou canst not raise forces, thou canst not raise
 forces enough to rebel.

“ I attempt from Love’s sickness to fly in vain,
 Since I am myself, my own fever,
 Since I am myself, my own fever and pain.”

MISS FITTON :

[*After the first verse.*] So you would rebel if you could. Hm. [Nods her head.]

SHAKESPEARE :

Like all rebels in order to taste the sweets of sovereignty.

HUGHES [*Sings the second verse.*]

“ For love has more pow’r and less mercy than fate,

To make us seek ruin, to make us seek ruin,
And love those that hate.

I attempt from Love’s sickness to fly in vain,
Since I am myself, my own fever,
Since I am myself, my own fever and pain.”

[*As Hughes finishes Miss Fitton rises. Hughes, bowing, goes out.*]

MISS FITTON :

[*Seats herself at the spinet.*] Why did you write that—“ to make us seek ruin and love those that hate ” ?

SHAKESPEARE :

I fear you don’t love me as I love you ; sometimes, even ——

MISS FITTON :

I don't hate you, or I shouldn't be here, should I?

[*Hums the words, " fever and pain," playing the tune.*]

SHAKESPEARE :

How I envy even the dead things about you ; the dress your body warms, the bracelets that clip your wrists ; even the jacks that leap to kiss the tender inward of your hand.

MISS FITTON :

[*Stops, and holds it to him.*] You may kiss it, too.

[*He kisses her palm, then draws her to him and kisses her lips. She rises.*] But now you must go : they'll be coming.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Rising.*] And when am I to see you again—when? [*Watching her face.*] To-day? [*She shakes her head.*] To-morrow? Next day? When? These hours of absence make me hunger for you till I faint. Be pitiful, sweet. The touch of your hand gives me life. When you go, my heart shrinks and lies here aching-cold till I see you again.

MISS FITTON :

[*Listening.*] I'm afraid they'll come in and——

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Imploringly.*] You have not told me when I may see you again.

MISS FITTON :

To-morrow I'm busy. Thursday? Yes, Thursday, at Lady Rutland's. She'll be in waiting here.

[*Gives her hand, which Shakespeare holds against his heart.*]

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Taking out some tables in ivory.*] I've brought you tables to mark our meetings in. Will you use them?

MISS FITTON :

How pretty, and here's a posy too in golden letters :

[*Reads.*] “ Doubt that the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love.”

That's because I doubted your sudden-deep affection.

SHAKESPEARE :

Write down the day we are to meet, will you? now; and all the time between shall die and be a void.

MISS FITTON :

[*Archly.*] Suppose I said to-night—here?

SHAKESPEARE :

What wine of life you pour ! My blood's aflame and shaken into blinding colours. To-night and night is here ! I feel the minutes throbbing past. To-night, my night of nights. O Sweet, make me atone this ecstasy, or—To-night, you Queen of Night—You heart of joy !

MISS FITTON :

I shall be late, you know. It will be midnight——

SHAKESPEARE :

Midnight !

MISS FITTON :

[*Listening.*] Hush.

SHAKESPEARE :

To-night, at mid of night. Ah, now I know that men are richer than the gods. Midnight !

MISS FITTON :

Hark ! They are coming ! Quick ! [*Shakespeare kisses her hand and hurries up the stage, L. A bevy of girls enter, c., talking, accompanied by gallants and preceded by Lacy.*]

SCENE IV.

LACY :

[*As Shakespeare passes.*] Ho, Ho ! Master Shakespeare doth fly from yon miracle of Nature, as from a dire portent. Methought her most brave strain of wit, and peremptory grace, would have charmed your nice fastidity.

SHAKESPEARE :

One may admire stars, my lord, at a distance.

LACY :

Do we adore because of the distance ? Ha ! Ha ! [*Bows with gesture. Shakespeare bows and goes out. Lacy turns to Miss Fitton.*] So the Queen of gipsies has enslaved the player-poet, and violet eyes will lose their blue with weeping.

MISS FITTON :

Violet eyes?

LACY :

Violet eyes and honey-coloured hair—a nymph of the morning !

MISS FITTON :

Whom are you talking about?

LACY :

Is it a secret? The dark lady, then, has her rival in the fair maid, and courage and wit on the one side contend with downcast eyes and shrinking modesty on the other.

MISS FITTON :

Do you jest, or am I to believe you? Who is she—a lady?

LACY :

Her name—Violet. Her rank—youth and beauty. I know no more; put the culprit to the question.

MISS FITTON :

Where did you see them?—When?

LACY :

At the playhouse, one afternoon.

MISS FITTON :

Ha, ha ! Now, if I had believed a man's oaths how I should hate myself. But, thank Heaven ! I was not befooled by his vows and protestations. The player may go to his trull, some orange-girl, I suppose, and brag ; but, thank God ! I am not his dupe. Violet, indeed ! [Laughs.]

LACY :

Do not be hasty-rash : I know nothing ; she may be but his friend and genteelly propagated : I only saw them together once.

MISS FITTON :

You would have me a credulous fool : a laughing-stock for the player and his patch. No, no ! I am schooled in time. Who stoops, suffers : the man who would win me, must have no Violet.

LACY :

It is nobler to trust too much than too little.

MISS FITTON :

I do wrong to be angry. Let us join the others, my lord, and take my thanks for your warning. [Walking towards the others.] Violet is a pretty name !

SCENE V.

HERBERT :

[*Enters; the ladies flock together and giggle; he goes to them.*] Well, Lady Cynthia, what's the story?

LADY CYNTHIA :

Story?

HERBERT :

The story that made you all laugh as I came in.

LADY CYNTHIA :

There was no story.

HERBERT :

It was truth, you mean. [*Lady Cynthia curtsies.*] Something pointed at me. What was it?

LADY CYNTHIA :

Why should you think it was about you?

HERBERT :

What was it, then? You silly girl, if you don't tell, the others will.

LADY CYNTHIA :

[*Turning to them in appeal.*] You won't, will you, girls?

MISS FITTON :

Of course they will; women always tell of each other, so I'll save them the trouble. Lady Cynthia said, she'd rather be the Queen you knelt to, than the Captain you struck.

LADY CYNTHIA :

Oh, I didn't, I didn't. I'll never forgive you, Mary Fitton, never !

MISS FITTON :

Well, if you didn't say it, I do, so protest's useless.

HERBERT :

And would you be the Queen, lady?

MISS FITTON :

Perhaps; for women can win, though conquered.

HERBERT :

Then conquest does not frighten you?

MISS FITTON :

Nothing frightens us but indifference. We women are fortresses, only sure of our valour when we're attacked : only convinced of our strength when we're taken, and as proud of being won as men are of winning.

HERBERT :

If the fortress is as strong as your tongue is sharp, 'twould need a Paladin to attempt it.

MISS FITTON :

Only cowards fear the strength of their opposites, and you, my lord, are no coward.

HERBERT :

[*Laughing, as if flattered.*] How do you know that, lady?

MISS FITTON :

By double proof, my lord.

HERBERT :

Double proof?

MISS FITTON :

Yes : you strike a Captain of thirty, and kiss a Queen of sixty. Give you good e'en, my lord !

[*Curtsies, and turns to go.*]

HERBERT :

You shan't escape like that ! [*Catches her by the waist.*] You must pay for your impertinence. Come, give me your lips, beauty.

MISS FITTON :

[*Holding her head away.*] That were to turn play into earnest.

HERBERT :

So much the better. [*Their eyes meet.*] I can be earnest, too. [*He kisses her; she draws away.*]

LACY :

If I intrude, I flex the knee : I'm sage-green with jealousy ; or shall I scent the lambent air with flowered gratulation ?

HERBERT :

[*Irritably.*] I wish you'd talk naturally, like a man, and not like a popinjay.

LACY :

In verity I belong to the brutish, bearded sex, as you may prove, my lord, when the occasion pleases you. [*Bows to Herbert.*] But " naturally " offends my sense, 'tis a gross and vulgar birth. Prithee, my lord, do you dress

“naturally”? or eat “naturally”? or house “naturally”? And if to be natural in all these is savage-vile, why should a man talk “naturally,” like a lewd barbarian?

HERBERT :

I mean why be singular in speech—fanciful, peculiar?

LACY :

The first man who made a girdle of skins instead of the fig-leaf was so admonished, and with equal consistency. Why wear a slashed doublet, my lord—most “fanciful-peculiar”?

HERBERT :

It becomes my place.

LACY :

And so my speech is more ornate than peasants use.

HERBERT :

But my doublet isn’t tagged with silly, useless ornaments, like your “scent the air,” and “sage-green with jealousy”! Green is good enough.

LACY :

Green means nothing ; but sage-green paints the bilious tinge of soured vanity ; still, a dispute about the shade concedes the principle.

HERBERT :

No, I think the common speech better, stronger.

LACY :

No ! No ! Ten thousand negatives ! I abhor your common fustian speech. Words, like coins, grow lighter in the using ; so I mint a new word to charm the ear, as a jeweller sets a gem to catch the eye. [*Turning to Miss Fitton.*] But I've tired you, most divine fair, with peevish argument, instead of pleasing with example. I entreat forgiveness : am carmined with confusion. [*A bevy of girls come up : the first cries—"We are allowed to dance" : the second—"How shall we begin, with the galliard or the Coranto?" [They speak chiefly to Lord Herbert and Mistress Fitton, because Lord Lacy is staring at one of their number, Lady Joan Nevil. Lacy, turning again to Herbert.]*] What heavenly pulchritude ! casting light, not shadow, upon earth. Who is the wonder, nymph or angel ? My eyes are blinded by her celestial radiance.

HERBERT :

[*Stepping forward.*] Lady Joan, let me present Lord Lacy here, who professes himself your admirer.

LACY :

[*Bowing to the ground.*] Admirer [*with a reproachful glance at Herbert*], worshipper of your most angelic loveliness ! Lady, my senses are all your slaves.

LADY JOAN :

I free them at once, my lord. I would not slavish service.

LACY :

O voice most tuneful and beyond music harmonious !

LADY JOAN :

Praise, my lord, should keep a measure ; sweets are quick to surfeit.

LACY :

Lady, if I cannot win your favour, I am like to die of grief.

LADY JOAN :

Live, my lord, live, and now if it please you let

us join the dancers. [*They turn off together; the dancing goes on with directions changing the galliard to the Coranto.*]

MISS FITTON :

[*Looking after Lacy.*] A curious jay.

HERBERT :

A soldier, scholar, traveller, all masked with this extravagance.

MISS FITTON :

Lady Joan may cure his distemper.

HERBERT :

Perhaps ; but why did you refuse my kiss? Am I so hateful to you?

MISS FITTON :

No, no.

HERBERT :

Why then withhold so small and usual a favour?

MISS FITTON :

One sometimes fears to give—not from penury ; but——

HERBERT :

You dear ! How did you know I love you ?

MISS FITTON :

I do not know it, my lord. Shall we dance ?

[*They pass, and Sir John Stanley and Lady Jane Wroth come in their turn to the centre.*]

STANLEY :

What do you women see in him ? He's impudent ; but good-looking boys are always impudent. I could forgive the Queen for loving Essex ; he's a man, a great Captain, too ; but this raw Herbert — pshaw !

LADY JANE WROTH :

Perhaps it's his youth pleases her, Sir John. And then he's marvellous well-featured. [*They pass, Lacy and Lady Joan, after a couple or two pass, return to c.*]

LACY :

[*Earnestly.*] My speech, lady, shall follow your taste, like my dress. If you prefer plain cloth to murreyed sarsenet, it shall be as you wish, I will speak poor drab. But taffeta phrases have a rich distinction, and silken terms are soothing to the sense.

LADY JOAN :

I would not have you altered, the gay doublet suits you : the fanciful speech, too. But just a touch of—austerity in ornament—is that how you speak?

LACY :

Rosebud of maidens, you delight my heart !

[They pass. Lady Cynthia Darrel and a Courtier come to the front.]

LADY CYNTHIA :

Do you think Mistress Fitton good-looking?

A COURTIER :

Good-looking, yes ; but swarthy.

LADY CYNTHIA :

Too tall for my taste, and bold. Ha ! Ha ! If that's your country innocence, I prefer the town. Those black eyes in that pale face—ugh ! Now Herbert is a model, perfect.

A COURTIER :

He's very well, and he knows it. *[They pass. Slowly Lord Herbert and Miss Fitton return. The Mistress of Ceremonies orders the cushion dance : the pages arrange the cushions.]*

MISS FITTON :

I know you don't ; too well I know it.

HERBERT :

I swear I do ; put me to the proof.

MISS FITTON :

What's the good ?

HERBERT :

All the good ; you'll have the proof, and be convinced, and yield. Try me.

MISS FITTON :

[*They dance: at the end of the bar, Herbert kneels on a cushion.*] How easy it is to gull oneself when one wishes to. If the Queen entered now, my lord, you'd be at her feet in an instant.

HERBERT :

Not I. Not if you promised to come to me : Will you ? [*Miss Fitton kisses his forehead.*]

MISS FITTON :

Do you mean you would stay by me even if she called you ?

HERBERT :

Even if she called, if you promise.

MISS FITTON :

You would not dare.

HERBERT :

Dare ! indeed ; wouldn't I ! [*They dance round, and when their turn comes to kiss, Miss Fitton gives her lips. Immediately afterwards the doors are thrown open and the Queen announced, R. Some servants enter backwards ; then the Queen moves to throne, R.C. The dancers stop ; all bow and curtsey.*]

SCENE VI.

THE QUEEN :

Let the dance go on ! [*The Queen looks round ; Herbert and Miss Fitton are standing L.C. The Queen calls " Lord Herbert." Herbert goes on talking to Miss Fitton as if he did not hear.*]

MISS FITTON :

[*In a loud whisper.*] Go, the Queen calls, go.

LORD HERBERT.

[*To Miss Fitton.*] But will you promise?

THE QUEEN :

Lord Herbert !

MISS FITTON :

Go, I'll forgive you, go.

HERBERT :

But will you promise?

THE QUEEN :

[*Turning to a Servant.*] Send Lord Herbert to me.

MISS FITTON :

[*As the servant nears the couple.*] Yes, I promise—sometime—go ! [*Herbert, bowing low to Miss Fitton, swings round, walks to the Queen, and puts one knee to the ground.*]

THE QUEEN :

[*Angrily.*] You forget your manners, my lord, and your duty.

HERBERT :

[*Smiling.*] Manners, ma'am, and duty are worthless frozen words : my allegiance to you is an irresistible passion ; as, you know, the desire of the moth for the light.

THE QUEEN :

Methinks, the moth is quite content with blackness, here. [*With a glance at Miss Fitton.*]

HERBERT :

The eyes that suffer through excess of radiance close of themselves to rest.

THE QUEEN :

[*As if pacified or negligent.*] You may dance, my lord. [*Amid the astonished silence and observation of all, Herbert bows and draws backward towards Miss Fitton.*] Go on with the dance. The Coranto, not that kissing thing. [*The Pages remove the cushions.*]

LADY JANE WROTH :

[*To Sir John Stanley.*] She hates to see others kissing.

STANLEY :

That's morality. [*The talk breaks out again, and the dance goes on. In a moment or so Herbert is at Miss Fitton's side, and they dance round.*]

THE QUEEN :

[*As they pass, calls*] Lord Herbert ! [*He dances on as if he didn't hear. The Queen descends from*

her throne, and takes him by the ear.] Are you deaf to-night? I will dance with you. [Lord Herbert bows, smiling, and they dance a measure or two; the Queen holds up her dress very high and marks each step elaborately in bygone fashion: when they come to c.]

HERBERT :

I knew I'd win you.

THE QUEEN :

Win me?

HERBERT :

And now I have succeeded.

THE QUEEN :

What do you mean?

HERBERT :

Jealousy is the best proof of love.

THE QUEEN :

You saucy boy ! [*They dance to the entrance, R. He holds the cloth, and the Queen passes through. As the cloth falls, Herbert turns and hastens back to Miss Fitton, who moves to meet him: the others are dispersing; the servants begin to dismantle the tent.*]

HERBERT :

Did I keep my word?

MISS FITTON :

How bold you are !

HERBERT :

And you—beautiful. Remember ! you promised.

MISS FITTON :

[*Hesitates, then looking at him nods as if reflecting.*] I did promise.

HERBERT :

Come, then.

MISS FITTON :

Oh no ; not to-night. To-night I must—I could not. I could not. It is so late. I said “ some-time.”

HERBERT :

You are too proud to cheat. I have your word. Come : it'll soon be midnight.

MISS FITTON :

Midnight !

HERBERT :

Yes, midnight. What of that?

MISS FITTON :

Nothing : nothing——

HERBERT :

Come, then. You are not afraid of the dark with me.

[While speaking he puts his arm round her, kisses her and draws her towards entrance, c. There he takes cloaks; wraps her in one and puts the other on. They go. The stage darkens. A servant comes in, takes up something and goes away. The stage darkens; stars appear. Midnight sounds from some neighbouring clock. On the first stroke Shakespeare enters from L., moves to trysting-place and waits. No one comes. In the distance faintly he hears his own song growing clearer as if the singer were passing by: "I am my own fever, my own fever and pain." He moves about restlessly while the song dies away.]

ACT III

SCENE I.

In the Mitre Tavern.

HOST :

[*Wiping the table.*] I can trust no more. I'm a poor man, Master Chettle.

CHETTLE :

[*Aside.*] Poor in flesh and poorer in spirit.
[*Aloud.*] Go to, man, I don't ask you for trust. From now on the drink of the day shall be paid in the day. What can you want more?

HOST :

Ay, that were good enough if——

CHETTLE :

Oh ! Your “ if ” ’s a scurvy coward, a water-drinker dripping with doubts ; no host for a generous tavern. Hark ye, ye don't send in the reckoning before the meal ; but an hour after. Make the hour three and ye shall have your money. Send me the drawer, man, and before night ye shall be paid. Was ever such an unbelieving sinner !

HOST :

Sinner, I may be, Master Chettle ; but unbelieving, no. I have trusted you these ten years, Master Chettle, and the reckoning grows ; every year it grows. That's not want of faith, Master Chettle.

CHETTLE :

Ha, ha ! Ye have me there : quick wits, Master Fry, and the riposto tickles. There, I'm glad it's settled. Send me the drawer and you shall have your money to-night. I never could haggle with a man of mind. And I bring you custom, man, more custom than any dozen, and such custom, the wits of London, the heads o' the world !

HOST :

Ay, ay ; but——

CHETTLE :

There, there ; it's settled : honest men have but one word. I know you good, Master Fry ; but hard like this new religion ; hard. There, there ! we are old friends. Send the drawer ; he knows my ways and quickly ; this tongue-fence hath made me dry. Here come my friends, a goodly company and all thirsty ; despatch, man,

despatch ! [*Exit Host : Jonson and Burbage enter together ; Fletcher, Dekker, Marston follow ; the drawer brings back Chettle his sack.*]

SCENE II.

JONSON :

I thought we'd find you here, Chettle ; but what are you doing ?

CHETTLE :

[*Writing.*] Writing, lad, for a meal, as a poet must in these niggard-tradesman times.

BURBAGE :

Have you seen Shakespeare ?

CHETTLE :

Shakespeare ? No. Why do you ask ? Is there any news ?

BURBAGE :

Great news ! The Lord Chamberlain writes me to be in readiness to play before the Queen. I must to the theatre at once.

FLETCHER :

I'm with you.

DEKKER }
MARSTON }

And I !

CHETTLE :

A drink, lads, before you go, to keep out the river-mist ; water's the cause of all my pains !

JONSON :

Sack, you mean ; sack and canary that make your blood boil with gout.

[The drawer brings wine in large flagons.]

CHETTLE :

Not so, bully Ben. Not so. Rheumatics, not gout. Ah, had my mother but given me sack when I was young and tender, I had never known these whoreson tweakings. A pious upbringing, Ben, and a watery diet have been my undoing.

BURBAGE :

Do you go with us, Jonson ?

JONSON :

No. I'm not known to your Lord Chamberlains.

FLETCHER :

Nor I. Yet I go to see the stir.

JONSON :

You are of the company.

FLETCHER :

No. I take Foster's place; you can have Browne's.

JONSON :

No, no ! I'll keep my own name and my own place. [*Enter Shakespeare.*] Ho, Will ! you're to be a courtier ; have you heard ?

SHAKESPEARE :

No : what is it ?

BURBAGE :

We must be ready : we may be summoned any day to play at Court : I have the order.

JONSON :

What's Chettle chuckling over there ?

CHETTLE :

[*Looking up from his writing.*] Angling for supper, lads ; just a snack.

DEKKER :

Let's see Chettle's snack.

FLETCHER :

[*Pounces on the paper and reads.*] It's a letter to Mistress Tagge of the "Tabard."

MARSTON :

Let's hear it !

JONSON :

Read it, Fletcher, read it !

CHETTLE :

No. No ! Mad lads ! That forked radish there shall not clapperclaw my work. If you must hear it I'll read it myself. No whipper-snapper shall squeak my words ! Now, lads, listen ! [*Reads.*] " To fair Mistress Tagge, the best hostess in London ; *argal* in the world ! I kiss your hands most beauteous and bountiful ; I have but now seen your drawer and heard that you want twenty angels to-night. The time's short, but I'll bring them as I'm a true man unless the rascal book-seller lies in his promise to me and that he'll not dare——

JONSON :

What a poor cheat ! Who's the bookseller,
Chettle ?

CHETTLE :

[*Reads on.*] " This very night I'll bring the
angels to my angel ! "

JONSON :

Oh, foul jest !

CHETTLE :

" But as I shall come late will sweet Mistress
Tagge prepare me a mouthful of supper—any
little thing'll do—a snack just to provoke appetite,
for indeed I'm far from strong.

JONSON :

Oh, mountainous weakling ! Tun of lard !

FLETCHER :

Now for the snack, boys ! Listen.

CHETTLE :

Ay, a snack, you pizzle ; a snack for a man.
[*Reads.*] " Say a slice of calver'd salmon at first
or a pickled lamprey and——

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Interrupting.*] “ Or indeed both,” Chettle, put in “ or indeed both,”—the salmon and the lamprey.

CHETTLE :

Right you are, bully boy. Right ! [*Corrects the letter and reads again.*] “ Say a slice of calver’d salmon at first or a pickled lamprey or indeed both, [*looks up at Shakespeare and laughs*] and then a loin of young pork dressed with your own select and poignant sauce and then a few oiled mushrooms——

SHAKESPEARE :

Too many “ thens,” Chettle. “ A few oiled mushrooms and one is ready to loose a button and begin.” [*All laugh.*]

CHETTLE :

True, true, lad ; ’tis but a beginning. [*Writes and reads on.*] “ For something to eat, a shoulder of mutton and a cantle of one of your noble pasties [*Shakespeare interjects “ just to quiet the stomach’s craving,” and Chettle writes and repeats the phrase*] just to quiet the stomach’s craving, and then a bird, say a pheasant for choice,

and afterwards a goose [*Shakespeare interjects* "to trifle with," *and again Chettle writes and repeats the words*] to trifle with, and instead of salad some barbel's beards—you know how I like 'em—and nothing more an' you love me—nothing, unless it be a morsel of cheese [*Shakespeare interjects* "to take away the cannibal taste of the meat" *and Chettle writes and repeats the words with a loud laugh*] to take away the cannibal taste of the meat."

JONSON :

You gulf of gluttony ! No wonder you're lame with gout !

CHETTLE :

It'll tweak you worse at my age, old gamecock ! Ah, lads ! My suppers are all numbered ; I can't increase 'em by one and so I want 'em all good. This world owes Hal Chettle a living.

FLETCHER :

Are you finished ?

CHETTLE :

[*Reads on.*] " And you'll not forget the wine, dear Mistress Tagge : nothing but your old sack

—sack without taint of sugar or cow's juice—pure milk o' the grape; and afterwards, if you will, a tankard of canary with my pipe, just to keep me warm thro' the long night. And as for the angels, count on 'em; if I can, I'll bring you twice twenty; for I love an open hand." [*Shakespeare, going to the door, interjects, " ' In others,' Chettle, ' in others.' "* *All laugh; but Chettle cries, " No, no, mad wag," as Shakespeare goes out.*]

JONSON :

You unspeakable liar, you; you haven't two coins in the world to clink together !

CHETTLE :

That's the virtue of the promise, thickhead ! Ha ; Ha ! lads ! He knows how to write and how to fight, the great boar, but not how to live. That's Chettle's art. Ben has no kindling fancy, no procreate imagination. I'll tell you a secret, lads, a rich secret, a secret of gold ; in this world large promises excite more goodwill than small performances, and praise to a woman is more than sacks of money. He ! he ! Oh, the sweet creatures ; how should we live without 'em ! And how angry I shall be to-night with that cozening, lying bookdealer ! Ha ! ha !

JONSON :

Haven't you any conscience?

CHETTLE :

No, bully boy, no : I've never been rich enough to keep a conscience : never ! With us poor devils conscience is like a court-suit put by for state occasions and then used as little as may be : we pawn it sometimes for a dinner. Conscience, look ye, is a jade that still cries " No, no ! " and never helps with brave encouragement : a good defender of the rich ; but a born foe of the poor, laming enterprise. No, no, lad, no conscience for me ; a bad one's worse than a belly-ache, and with a good one I'd starve. Conscience is like a shrewish wife (have I touched ye there, Ben?), as long as you listen to her she makes you miserable, and when you no longer care for her, why should you keep her? To conclude : Conscience, boys, is a bogey to frighten the feeble from frolic. Ha ! ha !

JONSON :

But as a man, aren't you ashamed to cheat a poor woman?

CHETTLE :

Have at ye again, lad ! In this world we all

cheat and are cheated. You cheat the groundlings and orange-girls out of their crosses with a bad play when they've paid to hear a good 'un, and I cheat by giving soft words instead of coins. And the conclusion! The girls are angry with you, while my hostess is in love with me. True virtue is good-humour, Ben : and a pleasant smile's more than all the commandments.

FLETCHER :

Chettle's putting up for a saint.

CHETTLE :

And why not, lad, why not? The greatest sinners always make the greatest saints. Reason : they've more stuff in 'em for good or evil and better wits to shape the mass to a purpose. Reason again. How can you help others to resist temptation unless you feel the strength of it in your own flesh?

JONSON :

You are the sum of all sins—a glutton, drunkard, letcher and shameless to boot : how can you talk of being a saint !

CHETTLE :

Sins of the flesh, my lad, find pardon easier than malice of the spirit ; I'd be a saint to-morrow,

but the living's thin and ye're all such unbelieving rascals that ye'd make me misdoubt my own virtue !

JONSON :

Virtue in you would be like a lump of butter in a raging fire, 'twould feed the flames !

CHETTLE :

That's the unbelief in ye, that still keeps me a sinner, a villainous sinner !

BURBAGE :

At this rate, Chettle, you'll make us all late. Come, boys, come, there's much to do.

CHETTLE :

'Tis a churl would leave a good dinner, but no one would leave good talk but a chough, and that was good, wasn't it, Ben?

JONSON :

Like your dinners, Chettle ; more to be praised for quantity than quality, but still——

CHETTLE :

Have with you, lads : I've a Court cloak in white sarsenet ; the colour of fear and of

conscience, it takes a stain in every weather and from every touch ! Ha ! ha ! ha !

[*Exit all save Jonson, who calls the drawer by stamping on the floor.*]

SCENE III.

JONSON :

[*To drawer.*] Bring me inkhorn and paper : I would write.

DRAWER :

[*Wiping the table.*] Coming, sir, coming !

[*Exit drawer.*]

Enter Shakespeare.

SCENE IV.

JONSON :

[*Watching him.*] What is it ? Will : what is it ? You wander in and out like one becrazed—The poisoned dart of old Virgil—Eh ? Yet surely you won your beauty ?

SHAKESPEARE :

I have not seen her for weeks.

JONSON :

What have you done?

SHAKESPEARE :

Herbert said he would speak to her.

JONSON :

Well?

SHAKESPEARE :

I have not seen him since.

JONSON :

Humph ! Like consequence, like cause.

SHAKESPEARE :

No, no ! he's my friend unwearied in kind offices. If you but knew——

JONSON :

Then why not find him and solve the riddle?

SHAKESPEARE :

I will : I must. To-day ; now. [*Goes to door and returns.*] But if she has changed to me—ah, Ben, hope is something ; we mortals live by hope.

JONSON :

Hope balanced by despair. Have done with
the ague-fit, man !

SHAKESPEARE :

You're right : I'll go at once. [Exit.]

JONSON :

[*Sitting down again to write.*] So honest Trust
has always Cheat for friend.

SCENE V.

A Room in Lord William Herbert's lodgings in London.

HERBERT :

[Unbuckles his belt and gives it with his sword to a gray-haired servant in livery: takes off his cap with its great jewelled brooch and throws it on the table.] Has no one come?

BODY-SERVANT :

No one, my lord; but there's a messenger from Wilton inquiring after your health.

HERBERT :

My health! Another of your tricks, Longman, I'll be sworn. You must be mad: I'm perfectly well.

BODY-SERVANT :

Your lordship had a chill last week and Lady Pembroke made me promise——

HERBERT :

[Waives him to silence.] Bah, bah! *[The Ser-*

vant bows and steps back.] I expect a lady this afternoon; the same who came the other day: you know, tall and dark; bring her to me here, and then you are free to write to my lady mother and tell her I have a tingling ear—the right one—don't forget. [*The Servant bows and retires backward. Herbert recalls him.*] And, Longman, tell the other servants I'm not to be disturbed. [*Exit Servant. Lord Herbert goes over to a mirror and arranges his slight moustache, runs his fingers through his hair, then picks up a sword and makes imaginary passes with it; at length takes up a book, throws himself into a chair and begins to read. A few moments pass; a discreet knock is heard at the door. Miss Fitton enters, Herbert reads on, till she stands before him and puts her hand on his book. He jumps to his feet.*] I am sorry, Mary. [*Kissing her.*] I did not hear you. I was reading an old love-story, the story of Achilles and the Siege of Troy. Won't you sit?

MISS FITTON :

And our love-story is not a month old. A month ago and you would have been waiting at the door for me; but now—— [*Sighs.*]

HERBERT :

I was waiting there to-day ; but you are very late, and one cannot play sentinel for ever. Have you heard the news? No ! Lady Joan instead of curing Lacy, has caught his trick of speech, and her quaint words and demure air set everyone roaring.

MISS FITTON :

We women are all ape-like in our loves ; I catch myself repeating your words like an echo : I wish I had been born a man—Heigh-ho ! But there's another piece of news—

HERBERT :

What's that?

MISS FITTON :

The Queen has heard that Lady Jane Wroth gives her lips too easily : she has locked her up for a month on bread and water.

HERBERT :

Joan's rather pretty, don't you think? with great child-eyes ; but shy—who's the happy man? Essex or Egerton, I'll be sworn.

MISS FITTON :

A newer lover, I hear, and one nearer to the Queen's heart—young William Herbert.

HERBERT :

I? Never, never. Oh! a kiss in passing—a mere courtesy——

MISS FITTON :

You are incorrigible !

HERBERT :

I am. How can I help it? I can't love the rose and scorn the lily. Every woman tempts me; but after all Mary is best [*tries to take her in his arms, but she draws away*], for Mary is hardest to win, and I love her—— [*Kisses her.*]

MISS FITTON :

[*Yielding.*] What fools we women are ! I know you don't love me ; but I cheat myself you do, and the slighter the proof the more I fondle it. What double fools, for when I would be true and brave and free, you lean your head upon my breast, and the mother in me makes me your slave ; my blood turns to milk ; I am all tenderness and take your desire for love. We are so foolish-fond—wretched creatures !

HERBERT :

Not much to choose between us : Come, Mary, here are your tables ; since you gave them to me I haven't kept you waiting once : now have I ?
[*Puts them on the table.*]

MISS FITTON :

No, and twice you have waited for me. If I could be sure you loved me—sure—[*A knock is heard at the door*] Who's that?

HERBERT :

I don't know ; I gave orders——[*The knocking is repeated.*]

MISS FITTON :

I must not be found here ; where ? where——

HERBERT :

[*Pointing to the door, R., and whispering.*] That door will take you out. Come to-morrow at the same time. You will ? [*Smiles as Miss Fitton says "Yes" and goes ; he returns towards door, C. ; the knocking is repeated.*] Come in there ; come in. [*Shakespeare enters.*] Oh, it's you, is it ?

SCENE VI.

SHAKESPEARE :

Unbidden ; but not, I hope, unwelcome.

HERBERT :

No, no. Come in and be seated. I was half asleep, I think.

SHAKESPEARE :

We have not tasted life together for days and days.

HERBERT :

'Tis true ; not since my quarrel with Raleigh. How the old limpet clings to place. He has just come to new honours, I hear : she has made him Governor of Jersey. Curse him !

SHAKESPEARE :

With honour one can always buy honours.

HERBERT :

[*Laughs.*] Yes ! the singular is more than the plural.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Hesitatingly.*] When I last saw you I begged your voice. Did you see her?

HERBERT :

I did. I wanted to speak to you about it; but it's not—pleasant.

SHAKESPEARE :

Not pleasant !

HERBERT :

I did my best, talked of your talents—all to no effect. Girls are queer monkeys !

SHAKESPEARE :

No effect !

HERBERT :

[*Looking in the mirror.*] I mean, though she admires you infinitely, she cannot love you.

SHAKESPEARE :

Cannot love me? Mistress Fitton !

HERBERT :

Who else?

SHAKESPEARE :

She told you she did not love me?

HERBERT :

[*Looking at his profile.*] She did.

SHAKESPEARE :

Strange !

HERBERT :

Why strange ?

SHAKESPEARE :

She does love me.

HERBERT :

[*Waving the mirror.*] Admire, yes ; but love, no !

SHAKESPEARE :

Love, yes !

HERBERT :

Friendship, affection, love if you will, but—but
—not passion.

SHAKESPEARE :

Passion.

HERBERT :

[*Throwing down the mirror.*] Do you mean to
say——

SHAKESPEARE :

Yes.

HERBERT :

[*Indignantly.*] What ! What ! Ha ! Ha ! Ha !
The damned young minx !

SHAKESPEARE :

Why do you call her minx ?

HERBERT :

Because—because she lied to me.

SHAKESPEARE :

No other reason ?

HERBERT :

None !

SHAKESPEARE :

What object could she have in deceiving you, as
to her love for me, you, my friend ?

HERBERT :

[*Carelessly.*] In faith I don't know—a girl's
whim, I suppose.

SHAKESPEARE :

Strange—a girl seldom denies her love—and
Mistress Fitton has courage. Most strange !

HERBERT :

Well, you must ravel out the tangle at some idle moment ; it's too knotty for me. Have you seen Chapman's " Iliad " ? I've just been reading it : 'tis as fine as Homer ; don't you think ?

SHAKESPEARE :

I am not learned enough to judge.

HERBERT :

I hear you met Bacon the other day. What did you think of him ?

SHAKESPEARE :

I know him too little—he's Jonson's friend—she denied me, you say, to you ?

HERBERT :

She did. 🙄 But now I must dress : you'll forgive me.

[Takes up his sword-belt and buckles it on : looks for his gloves and cap. Shakespeare in the meantime moves to the table and catches sight of the tablets which Herbert has thrown down.]

SHAKESPEARE :

[Picking up the tablets.] Oh, my divining soul !
[Turns to Herbert.] I pray you, of your courtesy ; when did you see Miss Fitton last ?

HERBERT :

[*Arranging his doublet before the mirror.*] Yesterday, to-day. Why?

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Showing tablets.*] When did she give you these?

HERBERT :

Those? where did you find them?

SHAKESPEARE :

She gave them to you?

HERBERT :

Mary Fitton? Yes.

SHAKESPEARE :

And *you* took them, knowing they were my gift to her?

HERBERT :

How could I know that?

SHAKESPEARE :

She told you. You must have asked where the verses came from : she hates verses, and loves truth—truth !

HERBERT :

Don't take it so tragic, man. A girl's kiss, no weightier than a breath.

SHAKESPEARE :

A girl's kiss, and a friend's faith. No weightier than a breath.

HERBERT :

In love and war, none of us is to be trusted.

SHAKESPEARE :

So !

HERBERT :

It wasn't all my fault——

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Taking hold of him, and watching his face.*]
Not your fault ! What ? She tempted you—
[*Herbert nods*]—and who could resist her ? she tempted you ! Oh, let her rot and perish and be damned ; the foul thing ! I am cold with loathing.

HERBERT :

I don't want to put the blame on her ; it all came naturally ; but you must not think I went about with intent to deceive you.

SHAKESPEARE :

She tempted you ; when ? The first time you saw her ; the very night I asked you to plead for me ?

HERBERT :

I don't wish to excuse myself; you know how such things happen. We danced; she dared me to wait by her when the Queen came; of course I waited—oh, curse it !

SHAKESPEARE :

She dared you. That rank pride of hers, the pride that ruined angels and unpeopled heaven ! The foul temptress ! Damn her, oh, damn her !

HERBERT :

Pride's no fault.

SHAKESPEARE :

No fault ! She swears love to me and then to you; kisses me and kisses you—no fault—she loves the slime that sticks to filthy deeds.

HERBERT :

You believe her when you're with her; she seems true.

SHAKESPEARE :

O, the world hath not a sweeter creature. She might have lain by an emperor's side. Hang her ! I do but say what she is. The public commoner !

HERBERT :

Don't blame her, she's so young.

SHAKESPEARE :

And so fair ! Such courage, strength, wit, grace, gaiety. God ! Had she been true one would have pawned the world for her. And now——

HERBERT :

You take it too tragic.

SHAKESPEARE :

Too tragic ! I have lost all—joy, hope, trust—all gone ; my pearl of life ; my garden of delight !

HERBERT :

Think, man : it's not the first time she has slipped, she doesn't pretend it is.

SHAKESPEARE :

The pity of it ; ah ! the pity of it ! The sky is all soiled : my lips, too—my hands—ah !

HERBERT :

Why can't you be a man, and take what's light lightly !

SHAKESPEARE :

Only the light do that ! [*To himself.*] Is it wrong to kill those light ones ?

HERBERT :

You would not hurt her.

SHAKESPEARE :

No ! That's true. I could not hurt her sweet, white flesh. God, how I love her ! I'll tear out that love ! Oh, the pity of it, the pity of it : all dirtied, all. But I'll not be fond !

HERBERT :

Why not ? she loves you ; she said so : it's true, most likely.

SHAKESPEARE :

Trust's dead in me : she has killed it. I think of her, and shudder—the sluttish spoil of opportunity. Faugh !

HERBERT :

Put it out of mind, and it's as if it had not been.

SHAKESPEARE :

You'll marry her ?

HERBERT :

I wouldn't marry an angel.

SHAKESPEARE :

And yet—she loved you—kissed you—gave herself to you : Damnation !

HERBERT :

You make too much of it !

SHAKESPEARE :

Too much ! I trusted you, your honour : bared my heart to you—— Ah ! the traitor wound !

HERBERT :

Forgive us both and forget : Come. [*Puts his hand out.*]

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Shrinks back.*] Words, words !

HERBERT :

I never meant to hurt you.

SHAKESPEARE :

That's the Judas curse ! They know not what they do ; but it's done. I had two idolatries—my friendship for you ; I loved your youth and bravery ! And my passion for her, the queen and

pearl of women. And now the faith's dead, the love's befouled.

HERBERT :

In a little while hope will spring again and new love.

SHAKESPEARE :

Never, my summer is past ! The leaves shake against the cold.

HERBERT :

What can I say? What can I do?

SHAKESPEARE :

Nothing : I must go. [*Turns to the door.*] You have your deeds to live with. [*Exit Shakespeare.*]

ACT IV

SCENE I.

In the " Mitre " Tavern.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*To Ben Jonson, whom he finds sitting.*] Good morning, Ben. Has Burbage left?

JONSON :

He's gone to the theatre ; he will be back, anon. You're all to go to Court, he says. Do you play?

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Indifferently.*] I don't know : I hope not. [*Drawer enters and gives Shakespeare a letter.*] Will you forgive me?

JONSON :

[*Shakespeare reads.*] I'll wager that's from Chettle, asking you to pay his reckoning. [*Shakespeare nods.*] But you won't do it. No one deserves help less.

SHAKESPEARE :

Those who deserve it least, Ben, often need it most.

JONSON :

Need ! He is all needs ; he but uses you—
shamelessly.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Looking at the letter and smiling.*] He signs
himself “the old roisterer who won’t trouble you
long.”

JONSON :

“The old roisterer” at your expense.

SHAKESPEARE :

I owe him what money can never pay [*takes
out his purse*] his jokes and humoured laughter.
He warms me with his hot love of life, and living.
[*Gives Drawer gold ; exit Drawer.*]

JONSON :

I’ve no patience with you. You play prince-
fool with everyone and you’ll suffer for it yet.

SHAKESPEARE :

Prince-fool, indeed. Which is the better title,
I wonder :—prince or fool ? [*Shakespeare goes to
window ; opens lattice and looks out.*] Hush ;
hark ! [*Opens the door, listens ; shuts it again.*]
Curse her !

JONSON :

Be careful of your money, man, and the world will let you play both parts at will.

SHAKESPEARE :

Money ! What is money to me ?

[Returning into the room again and moving about and then going to the casement.]

JONSON :

Everything, Will, shield and sword ; back and front piece. *[Shakespeare turns round listening.]* You are love's plaything, Will.

SHAKESPEARE :

[Stopping in front of him.] Love lives on love, Ben ; the less she gives me the less I crave. When I saw her every day it was too little, and now I see her twice a month, I'm no longer her slave. 'Tis not worth while to befool oneself for so little.

JONSON :

[Shrugging his shoulders.] H'm. You're not cured yet !

SHAKESPEARE :

Hush ! *[Hastens to door and listens, opens it ;*

drops his hands in despair, shuts it again, turns into the room.] Damn her !

JONSON :

Love, you know——

SHAKESPEARE :

[Stops in front of him.] Is it love or hate? Sometimes I hate her—sometimes she is coarse to me, obstinate and vain, soulless as a drab, sometimes *[Puts his hands to his face.]* the rose of women. *[Throws herself in a seat.]* I pass my time in waiting for her, thinking of her : I am degraded into a brute-desire. She writes, “ I will be with you in an hour,” that is three hours ago; she is not here yet, and may not come to-day ; damn her !

JONSON :

Why don't you work ; put her out of mind : forget her ?

SHAKESPEARE :

Forget ! work ! That is the worst of her, she kills my work, and yet she quickens life in me. When we sacrifice ourselves for some one, Ben ; when we give too much ; we grow to hate her !

. . . Is it not shameful of her to tease me so? [*Goes to window again and looks out.*] The slut! [*Sits down again.*]

JONSON :

They say a man gets the woman he merits. I have a shrew, a scold, constant and jealous like the itch; you a wanton, mad with pride. Yet we could be free if we would; we are afraid to hurt them, Will; that's it—afraid. What fools men are!

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Starting up.*] I wish she were here, I'd hurt her——

JONSON :

Hark; she comes! I'll not spoil sport.

[*Exit by door, L.*]

SCENE II.

[*Some one knocks at door, c.; Miss Fitton enters dressed in a man's cloak and hat.*]

MISS FITTON :

Am I late?

SHAKESPEARE :

Late ! I have been here for hours, walking up and down like a beast in a cage, listening for the step that never comes. When Hope has died and the ashes are cold, you come.

MISS FITTON :

Perhaps I should not have come : would that have been better ?

SHAKESPEARE :

I don't know : I am worn out with waiting.

MISS FITTON :

[*Half turning to door.*] I can go.

SHAKESPEARE :

You fiend ! [*Goes to her and takes her head in his hands, holds it back, and kisses her on the lips again and again.*] Kiss me ! Put your arms round me. Ah ! [*Takes a long breath.*] What a wretch you are ! I was afraid you had forgotten altogether and would not come !

MISS FITTON :

It was hard to come. [*Throws open her cloak, shows her dress.*] See, I was on duty. Jane Wroth was ill : I had to take her place : as soon

as I was free I threw on this cloak and hat and came. I didn't wait even to tire myself : [*Pats her hair.*] I must be hideous.

SHAKESPEARE :

You were to have come on Monday and didn't come : for hours I walked to and fro outside the Court—madness and I—a pretty pair—you would do well to fear us. But now—take off that hat and cloak.

MISS FITTON :

[*Takes off the hat ; takes up a hand-glass and looks at herself ; lays it down.*] I must be gone soon.

SHAKESPEARE :

What? You are but come, and already speak of going. Come, then.

[*Puts his arm around her and draws her towards the inner door, that, when open, shows a bedroom.*]

MISS FITTON :

No, no ; time fleets. I must go soon : it is impossible. Let us talk here.

SHAKESPEARE :

(You are the bellows and the fan to my desire :
yet as soon as you see the flame, you shrink and
leave me.

MISS FITTON :

[*Regarding him curiously.*] It is hard to please
you now.

SHAKESPEARE :

You don't try often—nor long.

MISS FITTON :

[*Shrugs her shoulders.*] You make it hard for
me to come again.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Goes and kneels at her feet as she is sitting,
and puts his hands on her waist.*] Why don't you
try to cure me another way? Why not come and
give yourself to me, till, surfeited with sweet, the
appetite may die? That is the cure of love.
Cure me like that !

MISS FITTON :

It might take long. But I like you better as
you are now.

SHAKESPEARE :

Do you ! Ah ! [*Putting his head back.*] If you knew the maddening hours I spend, longing, waiting, hoping, fearing, you would pity me. There is a martyrdom in love. I live in purgatory ; burning now with hell's fevers, and now my fiend comes and my dungeon, flame-lit, is more lovely-fair than Heaven. When you have gone the air will sing of you ; I close my eyes and hear the rustle of your garments, and [*putting his hands to his face*] on my hands there lingers the perfume of your beauty. [*He buries his face in her dress, then rises gravely.*] You once said love would keep love ; I love you, Mary, to madness.

MISS FITTON :

[*Rises, too.*] I am fond of you, too ; do not doubt it.

SHAKESPEARE :

Come, then [*putting his arm round her and drawing her towards the inner room*], and I will be what you like ; one short half-hour——

MISS FITTON :

[*Frees herself.*] No, no ; I must be gone. What

time is it? I must be back before the dinner; I must.

SHAKESPEARE :

You make me hate you! To be refused and shamed . . . My first thought was right.

MISS FITTON :

Your first thought?

SHAKESPEARE :

That damned boy!

MISS FITTON :

Herbert! [*Hurriedly.*] I have not seen him for days and days. Has he been here?

SHAKESPEARE :

He's not likely to come here. Damn him!

MISS FITTON :

[*Takes up her hat and begins to put it on; she puts her hair right with the hand-glass and then moves to the door and takes up her horseman's coat from the settle; all this while Shakespeare sits with his head on his hand. She moves across and stands beside him, and then puts her hand on his shoulder.*] You make it hard for me to

come ! You are so moody-sullen. What would you have me do ?

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Looking down.*] Love me, that's all [*As if to himself.*]*—*it isn't much. Give me love's ecstasy, the joy that beggars thanks ; the life that is divine. Love is my mortal sickness, love !

MISS FITTON :

You should rouse yourself : you are moody.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Looks up smiling.*] Mad, you would say ; why not ? It goes with " bad " and " glad " and " sad " — good words all ! Do you know how first I came to it ? I will tell you. Sit there and let my eyes feed on you. [*Miss Fitton sits near him.*] Strange ; you are more desirable now than when I first knew you. Then I saw faults in you ; now your faults all sharpen appetite. As I look at you it all comes back—that first day in White-hall when the morning air was warm like milk and the wavelets danced in the sun. Do you remember how we sat and kissed, each kiss longer than the last ? [*Mistress Fitton bows her*

head.] . . . I went the other day to the same spot by the river — I was alone and desolate — but of a sudden you came—[*she turns to him in wonder*] yourself, of grace and pride compounded, like a queen, and I touched your hair, and every separate hair a sin of multiple desire; I drew down your face and your lips clung and kissed as no lips ever kissed before. Then of a sudden you were gone, and I was awake—alone. Since then I have prayed to go mad again, to hold you, and so be mad for ever, lips on lips—— [*Mistress Fitton rises.*] What are you doing?

MISS FITTON :

[*Takes up cloak.*] I must go, Will; I must, indeed. I am late now. [*Holds the cloak to him.*]

SHAKESPEARE :

What ! Now ! You have been but a moment . . . [*He drapes her in the cloak.*] Perhaps it is best so. [*She turns to the door.*] You will come again soon?

MISS FITTON :

Soon. But I want to hear you laugh as you used to laugh and turn all things to humour and gaiety !

SHAKESPEARE :

Come soon, and I will clown it—soon ! [*She goes, nodding to him from the door.*] Soon.

SCENE III.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*While Shakespeare stands at gaze Ben Jonson enters.*] It is the end, I think—the end. [*Turns to the room.*] What weak curs we are, Ben : I beg her to come soon ; yet I wish she were dead !

JONSON :

A proud patch, that ; she's not likely to die soon : the devil takes care of his own.

SHAKESPEARE :

She's proud, indeed ; but why do you miscall her ?

JONSON :

We were there in the yard as she passed, three or four of us : the yard was dirty : she picked up her clothes and walked past us as if we were posts. Shapely legs she's got.

SHAKESPEARE :

Shapely, indeed. Damnation !

JONSON :

Why did she go so soon?

SHAKESPEARE :

Duty at Court, she said.

JONSON :

A convenient excuse. Why came she so far for so little? I'd seek another reason.

SHAKESPEARE :

Another reason? Speak plainly, man, like a friend.

JONSON :

Plainly, then, it's said she visits Herbert in that horseman's cloak. 'Twas Hughes spread the thing : he knows.

SHAKESPEARE :

Herbert ! Damn her !

JONSON :

Put her out of your head, man. Violet's worth a dozen of her. Put her out of your head and think of weightier things. You are to play at

Court this afternoon, and Burbage says the Queen will make you Master of the Revels if you ask for it. I wish 'twere mine for the asking.

SHAKESPEARE :

It irks me to ask favours of her : her hands are red with blood.

JONSON :

For your friends' sake, Will, if not for your own : Burbage wants it, all of us ; it would strengthen us, and we need it. The preachers grow louder against us every day, and the old cat is breaking fast ; she won't last long. Burleigh and all of them are in weekly letters with James. Ask boldly, man ; once in the place you are there for life.

SHAKESPEARE :

I will do my best. But I am glad I'm not on the stage. I hate the public show : I am in no mood to play bear or dog.

[The clock strikes one.]

JONSON :

Well, I must be gone or my vixen will bite. Good luck, Will, and don't forget you must be

our Master under the Lord Chamberlain. Your friends expect it of you. [Exit Jonson.]

SHAKESPEARE :

[Takes out a copy of "The Merry Wives," reads it for a few moments, then throws it down.]
It is all sickening to me. I can write nothing. The love of the work has left me : the love of life, too : when she went, all went—ambition, hope, everything. . . . Damn her ! How maimed and sore I am ! . . .

[After a few moments the clock strikes two ; a moment later the door opens and Miss Fitton comes in ; he starts up as she enters.]

MISS FITTON :

Have you heard? Herbert's in the Tower.

SHAKESPEARE :

For what crime?

MISS FITTON :

For loving me, I suppose.

SHAKESPEARE :

You don't expect me to weep?

MISS FITTON :

I thought you might do something ; get Southampton or one of your friends to ask for his release. It is only her temper !

SHAKESPEARE :

And you? What will you do.

MISS FITTON :

I am banned from Court ; supposed now to be on my way home. If she knew I was still here and for what purpose, there is no suffering she'd spare me. Yet I stay for pride, I think, and for the danger.

SHAKESPEARE :

And to see him again.

MISS FITTON :

No, that's done with. But I want him free, not punished.

SHAKESPEARE :

You love him still; why do you pretend to love me? You can't love two men.

MISS FITTON :

Can't I? I don't know, You are so different.

SHAKESPEARE :

What do you mean? You can't love us both.

MISS FITTON :

He dominates me and I you. He hurts me and I hurt you, and yet I can't bear you not to love me. I do love you, Will, really; you heal me when he has bruised me. You make me proud again and he humiliates me. I don't want to see him ever again. But I don't want him in prison, and I know I can ask you to help him. I wouldn't ask any other man; but you I can ask; you are the soul of kindness.

SHAKESPEARE :

Why did you give him my tablets?

MISS FITTON :

I gave him more—much more. And now I have to face——

SHAKESPEARE :

“ More? ”

MISS FITTON :

More than men dare or dread; we women always lose more than men.

SHAKESPEARE :

So you know love's penalty—you poor child !

MISS FITTON :

I suffer, if that's what you mean; but the suffering will pass. My courage rises to the need : the world is wide; the roads run free. What will be, will be. One mistake never ruins a man's life, and one mistake shall never ruin mine. Next summer the sun will shine again and the air be young and quick ; I have no fear. [*Turns to go.*] Farewell, I'm for the road. [*Mistress Fitton turns to go.*]

SHAKESPEARE :

You will come back. We shall meet again !

MISS FITTON :

[*Turns to the door, and turns back again.*] It is hard to say ; we've played at cross-purposes, Will ; but we all wound and are wounded in love's lists ; yet, after all, love is the soul of life.

SHAKESPEARE :

A great game ; and you are a great player, the greatest I shall ever know. [*Takes her hand and kisses it.*] Of many thousand kisses this poor last. [*Exit Miss Fitton.*]

SCENE IV.

[*Burbage, Marston, Dekker and Fletcher burst in.*]

BURBAGE :

Great news, Will, great news ! The Queen'll hear us in " The Merry Wives of Windsor " to-night in full Court. Now use your wit, my lad, and you'll be Master of the Revels, and our licence'll be safe and we'll all come to honour and riches !

DEKKER :

He counts his hens in the shell always.

FLETCHER [*To Shakespeare, humming.*] :

" Why so sad, singer, why so sad ?

Girls were deceivers ever—

One foot in Court and one on Stage,

To one love constant never ! "

SCENE V.

The Throne Room at Court.

[*The Queen enters, with train of ladies, lords, and counsellors, and takes the throne; Burghley, small and deformed, dressed in black, is on her right.*]

THE QUEEN :

The play was well enough. [*Turning to Burghley.*] My Lord Burghley, have you heard from our cousin James? Has he punished those raiders yet?

LORD BURGHLEY :

He'll give us every satisfaction, your Majesty, except what costs him money.

THE QUEEN :

A mean spirit and a long tongue; he had the one from his father, the other from his mother. And Essex? How does he bear his disgrace?

LORD BURGHLEY :

He chafes and talks loud; it'll all end in talk.

But he should not be strengthened, Madame; the time's unsettled and for that reason I'd pray your Majesty to release Lord Herbert; he's young and well liked of the common——

THE QUEEN :

Keep to your own business.

LORD BURGHLEY :

[*Bows low.*] Shall I write to the King of Scots imposing a penalty? He's responsible for disorder.

THE QUEEN :

I'm tired to-night.

LORD BURGHLEY :

Your complexion's brilliant; you look your best.

THE QUEEN :

Ah ! You think so. What's this?

[*Lord Lacy and Lady Joan come forward and bow low. Lord Lacy advances holding Lady Joan's hand.*]

THE QUEEN :

[*To Lacy.*] What is it? Speak.

LACY :

Oh, Dazzling Luminary, Glorious Orb of Britain whose radiant beams diffuse in all our hearts the light of loyalty, the warmth of admiration : most gracious, wisest Mistress, permit your most obedient, loyal servitor to approach your throne with humblest imprecation.

THE QUEEN :

If the prayer, my lord, be worthy of its dress, 'twill need our realm to content you. But give it words, man, plain words.

LACY :

Most Mighty Regent, you distress me ! I approach your queenly presence robed in vestments of State out of reverence for Britain's Majesty, and in the same spirit I would use orphrey'd phrases sewn with pearls of speech, and you ask me plain words.

THE QUEEN :

Let's have 'em jewelled if you will; but what's your want?

LACY :

The jewel of this realm, indeed : the prize of

all this nether world, the diamaunt of distinction——

[*Bows and waives to Lady Joan.*]

THE QUEEN :

What ! That Chit !

LACY :

Oh, Arbitress of Fate ! I supplicate your Sovereign Power ! enrich me with a word ; set joy-bells ringing with a gestic of grace and fill my heart with heavenly gratitude.

THE QUEEN :

[*To the girl.*] And you ? Shall he wear you ? It misdoubts me the gift's already given !

LADY JOAN :

[*Curtseying to the ground.*] Oh Fairest Vestal, Mirror of Beauty, Pink of Perfectness : I would requite my Lord with dutiful affection——

THE QUEEN :

I was sure you would, and with a dozen brats as well.

LADY JOAN :

'Tis only stars and our great Queen can live alone.

THE QUEEN :

[*To Burghley.*] I hate women's praises ; they're always feigned and false ! [*To Lacy.*] Do you hold the wedding in our Court, my lord ?

LACY :

Rectress of Action ! On bended knees and with a lowly heart I implicate your Majesty, let us withdraw from the blinding light of this world's Sun and hide our joys in sylvan shade where hours go softly by.

THE QUEEN :

The wedding should be here ; afterwards you can go to your estates ; does that please you, girl ?

LADY JOAN :

My beseechings flow to my lord's desire——

THE QUEEN :

By God's Body, they are both mad ; have it as ye will ; [*To Lady Joan*] but when you come again your beseechings, as you call them, may flow in another direction. [*To Burghley.*] Did ever Christian hear such phrases ?

[*Lacy and Lady Joan bow and retire.*]

LORD BURGHLEY :

The girl's worse than the man !

THE QUEEN :

Saw you any fashion, my lord, which my sex does not exaggerate? The woman has taken the infection from the man, but in the weaker body the fever rages most wildly——

SCENE VI.

THE QUEEN :

“ Her beseechings ” forsooth—I'm very weary !
[The Players enter and stand grouped by the servants at the end of the Hall.] Ah ! there are our players. Well, let that one approach who wrote the piece — I mean — Ach ! I forget his name !
[Turns to Lord Burghley.] Those common names are so hard to remember.

[The servant goes down the Hall and brings Shakespeare to the Queen. As Shakespeare bows low the Queen looks at him, but doesn't speak for some time.]

THE QUEEN :

[*Breathing heavily, as if tired.*] You wrote the piece?

SHAKESPEARE :

To please your Majesty !

THE QUEEN :

[*Slowly and with difficulty.*] I did say something about it; I've forgotten what—I—Yes—Oh, I wanted to see the fat Knight in love, and you wrote this “ Wives of Windsor ” to show it: 'tis not ill done, but the Knight was better in the earlier piece, much better; the story better too. Still, I wished it, and now—They say you're witty, and rhyme well, and would make a good Master of the Revels to save my Lord Chamberlain there—some labour——

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Bows low.*] I thank your gracious Majesty with all my heart, and should be proud to serve in any place; but——

THE QUEEN :

[*Starting up.*] But !—But ! The fools are all mad to-night. But what?

M

SHAKESPEARE :

I would prefer to private gain what our great Queen herself desires—

THE QUEEN :

[*Leaning back again.*] And that is? He, he! You'd be more than wizard to divine what I don't know.

SHAKESPEARE :

I had a friend, your Majesty, most dear——

THE QUEEN :

What's that to do with me, man? Say what you want and make no speeches; I've heard enough speeches to-night to last me a lifetime.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Kneeling.*] I beg for freedom, your Majesty, for my Lord Herbert: mercy for his youth——

THE QUEEN :

[*Sitting bolt upright.*] Did ever one hear the like? My dog will school me next! You forget your place, man.

SHAKESPEARE :

I am nothing, gracious lady, but a voice to the

pity in your heart : the meanest born may beg for mercy——

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes;
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest.

THE QUEEN :

[*Laughs loud.*] Ha ! ha ! ha ! The player's turned preacher. Ha ! ha ! Hark you [*She beckons him nearer.*] Your tongue's too long ; I'll have it cut if it wag so boldly.

SHAKESPEARE :

He loved you well, ma'am, and often spoke of all your greatness. His faults are youth and madcap daring.

THE QUEEN :

I care not. When we're hurt, we strike. He was kind to you, you say, and so you speak for him ; he cheated me——

SHAKESPEARE :

And me of all I loved and left me desolate.

THE QUEEN :

Ha ! And you plead for him. Faugh ! Even the cur snarls at those who beat him. Learn spirit from your dog !

SHAKESPEARE :

Ah ! madam, we learn sympathy from suffering,
pity from pain !

THE QUEEN :

[*Wearily leaning back in her throne.*] Do we?
I don't. [*Pause.*] I'm weary ! You can go now,
man ; go, I say ! [*Shakespeare bows and moves
towards the body of the hall ; after a pause the
Queen rises and takes Lord Burghley's arm.*] I'm
weary—weary ! [*All bow ; Queen goes out on
Burghley's arm.*] Very weary !

THE EPILOGUE

SCENE I.

Shakespeare's bedchamber in his house at Stratford. The master is seated in a large chair close to the bed. A small table stands near the head of the bed. His daughter Judith is in the room; as the curtain goes up she goes to the door and admits Jonson and Drayton. She will scarcely look at them, and soon after leaves the room.

JONSON :

[*Going quietly to bed.*] We came to see you, Shakespeare, before we return to town.

DRAYTON :

We were so sorry to hear you were ill. But what's the matter?

SHAKESPEARE :

My joy at seeing you both : the cup of wine last night ; our great talk—have set the old candle guttering.

JONSON :

It isn't what you drank; you were most temperate.

SHAKESPEARE :

I have poor unhappy brains for drinking : one cup, you know, was always too much for me.

DRAYTON :

It must have been the talk, Shakespeare; you drank nothing. But I never dreamt you were so weak; you used to seem strong enough.

SHAKESPEARE :

I was never strong, I think. Even as a youth any excitement robbed me of sleep and made me fanciful, and of late years I have only been well when very quiet—when the thin flame is lanternd from every breath [*with a gesture*]. But what matters it? If the candle goes out there's an end.

JONSON :

I blame myself for having overtired you. But you talked wonderfully—as no one ever talked before, I think, and I could not pull you up; now I blame myself.

SHAKESPEARE :

There's no blame possible. It was a great night ; one of the greatest nights of my life. But give me more news : I seem to have heard nothing ; are the boy-players still followed ?

DRAYTON :

No : the fashion's changed. There's some talk of having girl-actresses to play the girls' parts on the stage, as they do in France.

JONSON :

A mad proposal. It would bring the theatre into worse repute than ever, and give the Puritans a handle for attack.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Smiling.*] The pretty children ! Now at sixteen they all wish to be nuns or nursing sisters : then they would not know whether to be nuns or actresses, and they would be sure to confuse the duties : if they acted they'd try to do good to their hearers, and if they tended the sick they would want pretty dresses and a crowd of spectators to admire their devotion.

JONSON :

Ha, ha ! Excellent.

M*

DRAYTON :

Come to London soon, Shakespeare. We all miss our gentle peacemaker and his wit.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*With deprecating gesture.*] Tell me everything. Are there any new poets, new theatres? Do the Puritans disturb you? Here in my house my daughter puts preachers to lodge as soon as I go away for a week or so : to purge the air, I suppose, of my sinful presence.

JONSON :

There's no great change. Pembroke is in greater favour than ever; he's Lord Chamberlain now, and sends me money each year to buy books.

SHAKESPEARE :

Alms to escape oblivion.

[*Leans back wearily and closes eyes as daughter re-enters room.*]

DRAYTON :

[*To the daughter in a whisper.*] He's not dangerously ill, is he?

JUDITH SHAKESPEARE :

[*Tartly.*] Doctor Hall says father is very ill.

JONSON :

[*Holds out his hand.*] Oh, I am sorry, too sorry.
Our visit has done you harm.

SHAKESPEARE :

No need for grief. Our life is but a breath—
A rack of smoke that at the topmost height
Dislimns and fades away.

JONSON :

Not so, dear friend : the work remains. And
of all men you should be content, for your work
has already put you among the immortals.

SHAKESPEARE :

We are immortal only when we die;
It is the dead who steer the living——

JUDITH SHAKESPEARE :

[*To Jonson.*] Oh, please ! you must not make
him talk ; it was the talk last night gave father
the fever. Doctor Hall says talk excites him even
more than wine.

JONSON :

Then we must go, Shakespeare, but I never
thought we'd go so sadly. I can only hope now

that the illness will be short and that you will soon be yourself again.

[Shakespeare droops and does not answer.]

JUDITH SHAKESPEARE :

I must get your medicine, father. *[She goes out.]*

SHAKESPEARE :

[Half wandering.] So she's well and married—I'm glad !

JONSON :

Who?

SHAKESPEARE :

Mary—Mary Fitton. A great woman.

DRAYTON :

And beautiful !

SHAKESPEARE :

When she left me my hopes went down for ever. Strange ! At first I didn't suffer much ; it's the scratches hurt, not the death-wound ; but as the years went on I suffered : it was always ill with me here about my heart—

Yet I see now she was a wonderful piece of work—a great woman—she made me sound the depths.

JONSON :

And Pembroke? He didn't touch you so nearly?

SHAKESPEARE :

No. His was the poison of daily life; the small, hard nature, the low betrayal. It was well to forget him. But she was too great to be forgotten. There was something immortal in her, and I loved her.

JONSON :

I wonder you did not kill them both.

SHAKESPEARE :

No, no, Jonson: that is your nature, your violent nature. We all must suffer through the best in us: the mother through her child; the lover through his love; the wise through his wisdom—these are the growing pains of our humanity.

JUDITH SHAKESPEARE :

[*Enters again with medicine in her hand.*] Now, father, you must take this medicine. Sir [*to Drayton*], the doctor says that father must be kept very quiet.

JONSON :

[*Taking Shakespeare's hand.*] Then, Shakespeare, all good wishes and we go. Farewell, old friend, farewell.

DRAYTON :

[*Also taking Shakespeare's hand.*] Good-bye, dear friend, good-bye ! I shall have news of you from my brother who passes this way next week, and will tell us in London how you do. Farewell.

SHAKESPEARE :

Farewell. Farewell ! I thank you both for coming, and all your offices of friendship and your courtesy. Keep me in loving memory.

DRAYTON :

We shall, indeed ! [*Exit.*]

JONSON :

Always. Always. [*Going out he adds.*] So long as this machine lasts.

SCENE II.

His will is outspread now on the table by the bed.

JUDITH SHAKESPEARE :

[*To Shakespeare.*] My sister's downstairs and wants to know if you have altered the will.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Wearily lying back.*] Yes—yes. Ask her to come up. [*Judith goes to door and calls.*]

MISTRESS HALL :

[*Comes in. To Judith.*] How tired he looks ! Run at once for my husband, see if you can bring him : I think he's very ill. [*Judith hurries to the door and goes. Shakespeare lies with his eyes shut. Mistress Hall goes to him.*] Do you hear me, father?

SHAKESPEARE :

[*With closed eyes.*] Yes.

MISTRESS HALL :

You have altered the will?

SHAKESPEARE :

[*He bows his head.*] Yes.

MISTRESS HALL :

I hope you have given something good to mother in it. She's been so good to us.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Opens his eyes.*] Yes.

MISTRESS HALL :

Years ago she may have been jealous; but she has never left us for an hour. You must forgive, you know, if you hope for forgiveness.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Very low voice.*] I know.

MISTRESS HALL :

And you must think we love her as you loved your mother.

SHAKESPEARE :

[*Half wandering.*] Ah! My mother! The gentlest, sweetest—the noblest mother in the world! I often call to her as if she were still here, and feel her hands upon my forehead. I

think I'll sleep now. The long day's work is
done ! *[Closes his eyes in death.]*

JUDITH SHAKESPEARE :

[Enters.] The doctor's coming.

MISTRESS HALL :

[Looking at Shakespeare.] I am afraid he's
dead, Judith.

JUDITH SHAKESPEARE :

[Sobbing on her knees.] O ! Father, dear, dear,
dear— *[Rises from her knees at the bedside.]*
Oh, Susanna, look ! he's happy ; look ! he's
smiling.

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